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THE DESTINY SECRET!



BY
GUY CLINTON

A Plot to Change the World

BOOK 1

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*This book is dedicated to our modern day freedom fighters.
Especially for those who have already given up their lives in the quest
for freedom - people like Dr David Kelly, who lost his life in the
service of his country.*

*He was a very brave man. Highly aware of the risk he was taking
on behalf of his fellow countrymen, he single-handedly went into
battle against both the British and American Governments, riding
under the flag of truth.
He is an example to us all.*

Author's £5,000 Cash Reward

London: 5th November 2011

Guy Clinton, the author of the new thriller [The Destiny Secret](#), recently published as an ebook and due to be launched in hardcover at the end of November, is offering a reward of £5,000 to anyone who can

come up with another solution to what he believes is an inherently dangerous threat contained within the storyline of his book.

Clinton is convinced that if anyone decided to implement his dangerous mechanism, even the police officers will quickly turn against the Rule of Law.

The thriller revolves around a malevolent genius who plans to bring America crashing to its knees in less than six months, by implementing a clever but simple plot that targets the very foundation stone which supports Law and Order - rendering it totally counter-productive to arrest or kill the perpetrators.

The English born writer says that before putting pen to paper in 2007, he spent a long time agonising over whether he dared write the book. When asked about his concern, he says: "I know how powerful this mechanism is, and I was so worried about unleashing it onto the world, that I vowed the book would not be written unless I first had a workable solution. I am fully aware that all events throughout history have started with an idea, and mostly it's the simple ideas which prove effective - like the Trojan Horse."

The author added: "Although my solution works, it was only during the first edit that I realised if anyone knows of my solution in advance, they can anticipate it, then work around it quite easily. This means that the prospect of Law and Order being vaporised in less than a few months is still a real possibility."

He concluded: "To salve my conscience, I will gladly pay £5,000 to whoever comes up with the best watertight alternative, in return for their copyright of the idea. I will then rewrite the ending to include it, and with their permission, place him or her on the front cover as joint author."

Clinton is also offering 1% of the book rights, together with 1% of any future film rights.

The Kindle and ePub editions of [The Destiny Secret](http://www.thedestinysecret.net): A Plot to Change the World, published by Coolclear Publishing, were launched in mid-October. The hardcover edition will be available later this month.

To enter, or for more information, go to: www.thedestinysecret.net.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Guy Clinton may or may not, be the real name of the author. When you finish reading this book you will understand why he has taken the precaution of remaining obscure.

However he is male and grew up in a middle class, middle of the road family who moved to the Middle East in his mid-teens. Here he encountered his first dead person, lying in a gutter in Bahrain. The man had died from starvation and it left a lasting impression on him. Since then he has lived in many parts of the world including California, Spain, Holland and Australia. He is a passionate advocate of freedom, fishing and fine food - a superb cook.

The first time I met him in 2003, he told me the strange story of Dr David Kelly, adding that he felt the man who died trying to stop the second Iraq war deserved a medal for his bravery. The second time, we worked together editing film scripts in California, where he has developed a well-deserved reputation for writing powerful humour. If you enjoy comedy movies, there is a high chance you have already laughed at him.

He started writing this thriller four years ago. I have been involved in it from the start and I know he will not enjoy me saying this, but it must be said: He is a remarkable author. Remarkable not because he can write a superb thriller, and not because he is a researcher with a mania for the truth, but because he has

an unHINGING ability to perceive the future. He is prescience - the only one I have ever met who does not wear a cloak of ambiguity or trickery when he nails his shirt to the mast. He denies this, saying 'It's commonsense.'

It is the most uncommon sense I have ever witnessed.

There are many things that are not in this book. We made him remove them because they occurred after he wrote them but before publication. The fall of the Euro, fixed term parliaments, even Obama campaigning under the banner 'Change'. As I look through my files, it's quite a list. I first read them in the book outline some years ago and at the time I thought them far-fetched. I now know they have actually occurred. Certainly, everyone involved must be as shocked as I am about that aspect - it is truly remarkable. For two items he balked at taking out three of us teamed up against him and made him date them!

Given the recent events in the Middle East, I know now that many of the ideas he left in will follow the same path. That is the good news Guy - change is accelerating. You were right about that too but wrong about the rate: it's breathtaking. It has even made a cynic like me realize that all is now possible.

For someone who knows him as I do (see above) it is dangerously uplifting to read 'Our Destiny Secret' at the end of this book so I suggested he take it out as it seemed a step too far. He replied that was the single reason he had gone to the trouble of writing an entertaining book - for that one chapter. The book is designed to get people thinking and talking about where our destiny lies and, where it is dangerous to go looking.

As I write I can see a bottle of 1960 Premier cru Taittinger in the wine rack opposite me - your favourite champagne, Guy. It has your name on it but, you must drink it here.

Till then, then.

Take good care of him, Britain. It requires courage past the point of foolishness to write this. To present this level of truth. In the initial stages of the book's release, when only a few have read it, I think Guy stands in a position of great personal harm and danger.

Please ensure he comes to no harm.

John Simons, Shark Bay California, April 2011

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all of my friends who assisted with the writing of this book. You are wonderful people. A joy to know. Truly glorious. The dinners and conversation we shared are forever enshrined in a sanctuary of my mind. Thank you. Without your assistance and openness I doubt I would have ever finished this book: one all.

To all my friends in California: Thank you for your warmth, generosity and, the kind. You taught me more than I ever dreamed.

An inspired Thank You to my father, Morland, for his comment after hearing the book outline. 'If I were you, I'd pick up the typewriter tomorrow.' Without that comment, Dad, this book would not have birthed.

My thanks to Lydia Wanstall, for providing her editing skills early on, and to John Parsons for donating his intellectual balance which, I am still considering.

My sincere thanks to Annika Panika, the graphic designer who sprinkled beauty across the page, for her patience and precision.

My esteemed Thank yous to Chris, Gordon, Colin, Rick, Charlie, Barry, Marlin, Adam, Hilary, Eddie, Wolfgang, Ashley, Helena, Ingrid, Gav, Christy, Mark, P, Kaz and the many others who have helped, for

your comments and positive encouragement along the way. Thank you all for travelling with the production of this book. You each made the journey extraordinary.

My especial thanks, my highest accolade and my deepest gratitude, go to two people who stepped boldly over the line of good, common sense. Throwing their pragmatism and time overboard, they kept our ship afloat. Through tempest and becalm, they brought this book safely to harbour; setting her high and proud in the water: shipshape, shining like a mirror, Bristol fashion. You both fought hard. You each fought well. On occasion you had to grapple demonically, but you always did so with care, kindness and consideration. I am blessed with an eternal regard for your skill and determination. You never stopped bailing - you never once bailed:

Vicky and Chrissy, you are so exceptional, your abilities so exemplary, that you have resurrected a sensation I have rarely felt: I am truly lost for the words to describe how I cherish what you each have given.

Having hunted through the Thesaurus until the early hours, I am now certain they do not exist.

Always

gx

Somewhere in the not too distant future

MONKEYING

Leah felt nervous as she stood outside the study door, her stretched nerves tautened by the knowledge that she was twenty minutes late – the professor had a well-known intolerance of tardiness. ‘I wonder what he'll be like? Bearded and smelly, I bet,’ she thought defensively.

She picked up the weighty door knocker gingerly, then rapped it down on its metal stud. The noise boomed loudly and as the unexpected shockwave echoed through the stone cloister, Leah went up on her toes in embarrassment.

A voice from inside called out in annoyance, ‘Come in. Come in. And for God’s sake stop that dreadful banging, it’s enough to awaken Neptune from his slumber.’

She smoothed her skirt, stepped in and smiled with a confidence she wasn’t feeling. For the past two weeks Leah had Googled the Professor extensively, surprised to discover there was not a single photograph of him anywhere. She had unearthed reams of articles and references to him in the press, detailing his advice and guidance to many different countries’ governments over the years, but no picture. It was noticeably odd in a person so intrinsically involved with the world, and she looked at him cautiously.

He was the complete opposite of the picture she had drawn in her mind. The Professor stood tall and straight but poised; emanating a *présence royale*, as though he were on the brink of orchestrating a momentous event. His white hair was swept back behind his ears and grown long, rolling down his neck

like a mane. He was clean shaven and looked barely fifty, although she knew from her research that he was really sixty-four. But what stopped her abruptly, were his eyes. The left was a startling emerald green, while his right was the light blue of an arctic current.

'Ahh, you must be the late Miss Leah Samantha Karen Mandrille,' he said as though announcing her name in court, his eyes holding hers steadily.

'Yes, I am both, unfortunately,' she replied, trying to make her voice sound confident and mature.

Breaking his stare, he gestured at the far corner of the room. 'Let's go and sit in the window seat, which currently serves as my dining room.'

Leah walked over and swivelled her legs under the ancient oak dining table, sweeping her gaze around the room to take in her surroundings more fully. The room was large and there were books everywhere. The ceiling was double-height and an extensive library was covering every square inch the walls could offer up.

It wasn't nearly enough. Zigzag columns of books and tomes were balancing precariously on the floor and chairs, some left open, defying gravity. Rising up through these were random outcrops of antique furniture and a dark Edwardian drinks cabinet. At the far end of the study, a blackened fireplace was courted by a velvet Louis XV chaise-longue with two stunning armchairs, and though they looked quite lovely, their canary yellow silk warred with the sombre browns, greens and blacks of the books.

Over in the middle of the room, hidden amongst the confused sea of volumes was an island, formed by a round table, on which sat a huge chess set with the pieces laid out, the white king's pawn already advanced two squares, trying to tempt an invisible black opponent into making the next move.

She looked up at the Professor who had chosen not to sit, but stand. He was looking down at her with a quiver of amusement tugging at the corners of his mouth. 'Given that you are twenty minutes late, I thought we should celebrate. May I offer you a dry sherry?'

'I am so sorry I'm late. But someone—' and instantly the Professor held his left hand up, stopping her in mid-sentence as he poured the wine into two Renaissance glasses.

'Please don't apologise. I prefer to celebrate your victory over the Jaws of Death, or some other cataclysm which no doubt effected your delay,' he said, handing her a glass which spun diamonds around the room.

Holding up his own glass in salute, he offered a toast. 'To the Jaws of Death. Without them, the hallowed Halls of Life would be valueless.'

Leah raised hers with him, trying to maintain a level and open demeanour. Though young, she was extremely astute and had been able to read hearts and minds from an early age, but as she tried to gauge his emotions, her sight was drawn into his green eye. It was flecked with gold and she felt herself being pulled towards its source. But the deeper she went, the farther she seemed to get from any insight to the man. Becoming aware of her stare she switched over to his blue eye and went hunting there for clues to his persona.

Nothing at first, then slowly she saw it. Nestling deep in the sapphire blue ring glistened a small flicker of humour – as in a joke unsaid or the glint of an imaginary irony perhaps; the same look her younger brothers shared, moments before they did something truly horrid.

Forcing herself to relax, she sipped at her sherry and after a brief silence the Professor reached down to pluck a worn clipboard off the dining table. Glancing at the A4 sheets he said offhandedly, 'It says here that you wish to study Political Theory, Human Psychology, Political History, blah, Political Science, more blah, with an emphasis on...blah, which just happens to include all seven subjects I teach. Now please help me my girl, because I am unable to ascertain whether this constitutes flattery or gluttony. What is your opinion?'

'Definitely flattery, it's one of the few things I never underestimate,' she replied, trying to soften the compliment with a little humour.

'Hmmm, I wouldn't underestimate the lure of gluttony when it comes to the *body politic*,' the Professor smiled back a lovely smile: heartfelt and open, with only a hint of guile.

'The thing is this, Miss Mandrille, most of the students who come here are eighteen to twenty years old and our system of teaching supports them well. There is a certain understanding of the world which only comes with age. So with all due respect to what you achieved in the exam room, I strongly recommend you take a year or two off before enrolling. At seventeen, you will gain far less from Oxford than you will

in a year or two. Take some time off – travel, get tattooed. Then you can come back here to Oxford, relaxed in the sure and certain knowledge that for once, you are perfectly on time.'

So there it was, deftly thrown on the table between them in under a minute – he didn't feel she should take up her place at the University, because she was one year early and twenty minutes late.

She wondered whether to play it back with a subservient acquiescence or a more sure-footed confidence. 'Definitely neither,' she realised. To quench her thirst for the knowledge she could sense was out there, hiding just beyond the horizon of this interview, she had to show genuine substance to convince this man she was mature enough to enrol in twelve weeks' time.

Her reply needed to be considered and intelligent to win back his approval. After weighing her options carefully, she decided on a full frontal attack.

'Let's see. My mother died of cancer when I was seven, which meant I had to grow up rather quickly. She left me with four brothers, two of them younger and my father, who went on from Oxford to become a career diplomat. By twelve, I was fluent in various dialects of Arabic, Farsi, French and Italian, and was fighting my eldest two siblings while nurturing the other two. When I was fourteen my oldest brother Simon and I, sneaked out to climb a section of Mont Blanc, where I had my first near-death experience. Sadly, Simon was less fortunate. My father took it badly and I had to nurse him through our dreadful loss. In seven short years he had lost his wife and first child, while I had lost my mother and my best friend.'

'I am sorry to hear that, but misfortune and tragedy often worship at the same altar – pray continue.'

'For a while, my father and I became interdependent. He asked me to hostess the dinner parties and luncheons which he frequently held at home as part of his diplomatic position. I learned a great deal from this exposure and taught myself composure. Then at fifteen, he extended my role to being his official escort at various diplomatic functions. At first they terrified me, now I wonder what could. Most of my schooling was done on my own or online, and with the exception of chemistry my grades were always As – as you can see. Taken together, these experiences have given me a greater maturity and worldliness than most twenty-five-year-olds. Plus of course, I have one thing they have lost.'

'What might that be?' prompted the Professor gently.

And she pulled the trigger.

'I'm a blank coin on which you can make your stamp. I trust this means that when I am twenty-one, I will have my Masters in both Political Science and Human Psychology. These, along with my languages and the experience I gained from my father, will make me the youngest Ambassador Britain has ever fielded. I am aware that you are one of the world's foremost political thinkers and that you have hand-steered democracy into many countries during your lifetime. A few I spoke with, confided you are a sought-after advisor to several Governments' think-tanks which compete for your patronage and advice. I thought if I proved worthy, you could advise me on how to launch my own career in the diplomatic corps. That's why I applied for all of your courses first, fitting in the others around them. I'm here because I believe you can help me achieve my ambition.' Then deciding to give the knife of her logic a playful twist she added, 'Quicker than I could on my own.'

Leah lifted her glass and sipped, watching the Professor closely, hoping her tectonic determination and minimal use of language would reveal an understanding beyond her years.

'What an extraordinary woman,' the Professor thought, finding he had to remind himself that she had only just turned seventeen.

He knew her aura of maturity couldn't be just her life experiences, so it had to be in conjunction with insight – which he knew was very hard to teach, if not impossible. Nevertheless, what about her resolve? Her resolve for the task ahead? He decided to venture over to this tree of doubt and see if he could shake a small bruised fruit off one of its low-lying branches.

'My dear girl,' he blustered slightly. 'Let me give you some very good advice. I have been here for nearly twenty-six years and have never seen anyone prove me wrong in this, so I implore you to reconsider. You will be trading the cream of your youth for late-night essay writing and lectures – a mistake which often ends in tears. 'Wisely and slow, they stumble that run fast,' he threw Shakespeare at her, 'is very good advice indeed.'

Leah placed her glass back on the table. 'I hope you don't mind if I pass on that advice, because I like to pass on good advice. It's the only thing to do with it,' she fired back Oscar Wilde in riposte.

'Precisely what differentiates good advice from bad?' he asked quickly.

‘Apart from the end result, there isn’t much to distinguish them. But in my limited experience, the motive of the advisor seems to make the crucial difference,’ this time quoting one of her father’s oft-repeated mantras, thinking it unwise to volunteer the source. With a sliver of satisfaction, she watched the Professor languorously pull out a chair and sit down opposite. The act seemed to have an air of resignation to it.

‘Whoever said "Youth is wasted on the young", was a genius who deserves to be better known.’ He cocked a mischievous blue eye at her as he reached for the decanter to refill their glasses, hers first, before continuing. ‘I see now how you managed to pass the entrance exams with such ease – no mean feat at your age, or at any age for that matter. I did however notice, that on your English paper the 8 - the last digit of your birth date - looked very much like a 5. Which, if simply glanced at, would add three years to your age; something I doubt most examiners would ever expect or check up on. This happened either by accident or through *design*,’ he said, drawing out the word and looking at her intently, ‘because I found this to be the case on all of your exam papers.’

Her heart skipped a beat, then juddered to a stop – his accusation had turned her blood to ice, and she dare not speak in case her voice added betrayal. Barely able to contain her neutral expression, she picked up her glass again and sipped, forcing as much serenity into the act as possible.

Gazing up vacantly at the ceiling over her head, while tapping at his chin with a long tapering finger, he mused aloud: ‘They must have thought they were reading the paper of a twenty-year-old. Not adding the intellectual snobbery and scorn they would undoubtedly have poured onto a seventeen-year-olds answers.’

The fact that he was absolutely right was not easing Leah’s comfort level – his last comment had widened her eyes and bleached her face white; for not only had he spotted her little ruse, but correctly guessed her motive.

‘Busted. I’m absolutely busted,’ she thought fearfully.

Leah had intentionally styled her answers to reflect the views of an older student to imply she was twenty. Believing this approach stood a better chance for success than shouting her youth, she had deliberately switched it around the other way: imprinting a 5 darkly on her exam papers, then tracing a thin line to make the diagonal and form the 8 – expecting any closer examination to exonerate her from an accusation of cheating. Once her Oxbridge entrance results had come through, she thought that particular door had closed behind her forever. Looking up anxiously at the Professor, she was surprised to see her acute concern reflecting back in his own expression. He was looking at her in a way that was...

...kind.

‘Please don’t trouble yourself, my girl. There is nothing to fear because your secret is completely safe with me. In fact, I applaud your ingenuity. In my experience, cheating in exams sometimes occurs when a person pretends to be younger, not older. And personally, I have never had much regard for the intelligence of examiners *per se*. Actually, if your exam marks had been lower I might have phoned them up, to persuade in the strongest terms possible that your papers be reassessed to produce a higher grade. From my point of view it is most unfortunate that wasn’t required – I really look forward to an intellectual spat after breakfast.’

Reaching across the table he gently took her left hand in his, turning it palm up before covering it with his other, then with his green eye sparkling gold-dust in the evening sunlight, he spoke in the hushed tones of a conspirator, ‘Funnily enough, it made me bang my foot down and insist that I should be the one to interview you for your place here at Oxford. I give you my word that the only people who will ever know of your sleight-of-hand, are sitting in this room right now. You can be certain, because although I read your exam papers with the utmost care, by the time I re-filed them I happened to notice, that rather annoyingly they were all missing a corner of the first page. The corner which happens to hold the DOB,’ and he pressed his top hand down on hers, in the same way he might secretly tip the maitre d’ of a restaurant.

Leah could feel the small pieces of paper being pressed into her palm and looked at him in a wave of relief, in time to see, just for a moment, the glittering sparkle of unfathomable intelligence appear genie-like, in his right blue eye.

‘It is my great honour to welcome you to Oxford University, Miss Mandrille. You will be the youngest girl I have ever taught.’

‘Thank you so much. You won’t regret your decision Professor Simmius.’

'My name is Victor. Feel free to use it, and never again address me in private as "Professor Simmius", or I will call you by the somewhat disconcerting title of "Student Mandrille".'

'Thank you...Victor,' she smiled, feeling her composure flooding back warmly, as a stronger feeling pricked at her perception, demanding to be heard. The bell of intuition was tolling loudly in her middle mind, revealing something Leah had rarely felt before: she somehow knew, with absolute certainty, that all secrets would be safe with this man.

And as is so often the way with instinct, she was very nearly one hundred per cent correct.

'Had you worried there for a moment, did I not? My apologies, but I needed to be certain of both you, *and* your commitment.'

'I can never thank you enough, Victor. But I would love to know who said "Youth is wasted on the young", I've never heard that phrase before.'

'Some say George Bernard Shaw plagiarised Oscar Wilde, but nowadays, most people accuse me of the crime.'

Hearing this, Leah broke into uncontrollable laughter. It was contagious, and as her second bout came around, Victor joined in.



BOOK 1

A Plot to Change the World

*QUIS CUSTODIET IPSOS CUSTODES?
Who will keep watch over the Guardians?*

*It's the revolutionaries who are polite
That you must watch out for*

Guy Clinton

THE WARRIOR APE

Waiting patiently in the heat, he glanced at the rifle on the blanket in front of him then checked his watch: 14:42. In eighteen minutes time, with a single shot, he would write a new chapter into the Book of Mankind. That is all it would take now – one accurate shot.

He was lying on the roof of an elevator shaft at the top of an eight storey office building, in the shadow of two large cardboard boxes he had filled with bricks. He peered down cautiously at the mêlée of cameramen and journalists, who were waiting impatiently at the base of the steps leading up to the wide entrance of Sacramento City Hall.

Five days earlier, the laser range finder had given him 253 yards distance-to-target, and the awesome power of his gun meant the heavy bullet would fly virtually 'flat', ensuring he would hit his target without having to compensate, or in sniper-speak 'allow for the mark', by having to raise his aim to offset gravity's effect on the bullet.

Bullets fired from a gun aimed parallel with the ground, fall at the same speed they drop from a hand; so the height of eight storeys was a blessing, as the bullet's descent is always calculated on the horizontal plane, while he was shooting downhill at a forty degree angle. He didn't want to make the classic rifleman error of shooting high over the mark, when aiming down at his target. In the end, he decided on a 11/4 inch offset, then even if he was wrong, it would make very little difference.

To further enhance the accuracy of the rifle, it had a Boss screw on the end. To the untrained eye – a silencer. It tuned the barrel so that it always flexed in exactly the same way when fired, neatly removing the ability of the bending barrel from fractionally altering the path of his bullet. When the Remington engineers' first bench tested the gun, they were surprised to see it would shoot a 0.5-inch wide group of three bullets at 200 yards, and, given the bullet itself was 0.3 inches wide, that effectively meant three bullets through the same hole.

High tech, state-of-the-art, his rifle packed mind-stunning punch – delivering a heavy 200 grain bullet, easily capable of felling a large elk or grizzly bear at 500 yards, while only dropping eighteen inches over the distance.

'That's right, son,' the salesman had said proudly. 'With a Remington 300 short Magnum, all you need do, is put fur on them crosshairs at 500, and it's down. It'll hit that son-of-a-bitch with 2300 foot pounds at that range, while most hunting rifles max-out at two fifty.'

He was all too aware of the fact. He had guided the salesman to 'find' it for him while feigning ignorance throughout the process. But the rifle had an additional advantage, one even the salesman had carefully avoided mentioning: the noise it made was deafening; the sound wave would echo off the buildings surrounding the city centre for two miles, making it impossible to locate his hiding place by ear.

It had taken him two days of discreet surveillance to select this particular position and it couldn't be better. Not only did it meet all the technical requirements for the shot he was about to take, but it also provided him with a superb escape route. His safe exit was the deciding factor in choosing this specific building, from a previous shortlist of three. It also enabled him to face east, and at 3.00 PM the sun would be sitting directly behind the roof he was secreted on, making visual detection by the eye witnesses around the Governor also impossible on this bright and cloudless day.

The heat was making the air suffocatingly still. Some of the reporters were holding up writing pads as a shield against the searing eye of the sun, and he smiled inwardly: the sun had always been a good friend, a trusted ally – he had spent most of his life in regions where this temperature was considered mild.

He watched a few of the photographers adjusting their camera focuses, and chuckled out loud when he realised the photo journos did have one thing in common with him – they would be the last people to see the Governor of California alive, through a lens.

The irony wasn't wasted on him because this Governor, like several of his predecessors, had been a movie star before stepping into the political arena. The man had lived his life in front of the lens and in a few short minutes, he would die by one. The same technology which had kissed the Governor's life with fame and fortune, was the very technology that would take it away. The essential ingredient for both to happen was in place – a good man behind the lens.

And Ali Bin Mohammed knew he was a good man.

Truly, Allah must have led him to this place in time for a purpose. If He had not ripped out the divine links from the torsioned chain of Ali's existence, he would be leading a very different life. Surely the intervention and suffering he had experienced in his youth must have celestial approval? Because without this explanation, both he and the rest of the world were nothing more than rudderless ships, adrift on a windless sea of self-obsession.

'It is the will of God, or I would have died before this,' Ali reminded himself, sweeping aside the unsettling thought of empty eternity.

Waiting motionless, feeling the tension of the coming moment draw near, he allowed his mind to wander along the switchback road of his life, over all the events which had brought him to this dividing point in the fate of the world, and knew that without each of them occurring in their precise order, he would probably be a doctor now as his father had always wished – saving life, not taking it.

Ali's father had taught him how to shoot when he was still a boy. Mohammed was a respected marksman and rumours abounded that he once shot dead four enemy soldiers, with four consecutive shots, at a range of 300 yards. His father had arrived home late for the evening meal on Ali's birthday that year, a thing he rarely did on any day, believing in the importance of mealtimes as the keystone of family life. Woe betide Ali, his little brother or sister, if any of them were late for the daily ritual. Yet on this rather more special occasion of his birthday, his father was late.

Ali's mother saw him coming first. She jumped up from her cushion to ladle a bowl of succulent goat stew laced with limes, hot chillies and bittersweet green dates from the tureen. A special treat in these poorer times, and the treats were getting rarer.

The memory of that day was vivid in his mind. He could still smell the aroma of his mother's stew as she spooned it into a bowl, chattering excitedly that she could see Mohammed carrying his birthday present.

In the run up to Ali's birthday, his father had taken every opportunity to say he was about to get a present he would never forget. But he always looked deadly serious when he said it, making Ali's thoughts ricochet between tremendous excitement, and a worrying fear over what it might be; so he was suddenly overcome by an acute, almost painful sense of apprehension when his father stepped into the kitchen holding the present. 'I'm sorry I am late, but I had to walk a long way to get this.'

Mohammed smiled lovingly at his family, ruffled Ali's hair as he wished him a happy birthday, then with inordinate care he gently placed the gift on the rug between them.

The present was slender, wrapped in an old blanket tied with coarse string at both ends, and Ali looked down at it fixedly – unsure whether it was good or bad, friend or foe.

'I hope you will like it,' Mohammed beamed a broad smile at his first born, showing the gap between his top front teeth – the reason he had been renamed after the Great Prophet of Islam when only six years old. The Mohammed of 700 AD is thought to have been gap-toothed in the same way, and it is considered very lucky in Muslims, if not tilting tentatively towards the divine.

Ali stared down at the gift, caught between fear and fascination, horror and hope – as though it were a beautiful but deadly snake. Taking a deep breath he squared his shoulders to pick up the bundle and to his delight, unwrapped a small rifle – a .243 Mannlicher showing the signs of an active life: the ball on the end of the bolt was silvered by the three generations of palms which had slipped it home; the wooden stock pitted and shiny black around the grip; giving it the overall look of a grey old man with a lopsided grin.

Electrified with excitement, Ali mounted the gun to his shoulder and swung the rifle around; pointing at imaginary targets, shouting 'Bang, Bang.' With a giggle, he aimed the rifle at his sister sitting at the far end of the rug. Settling the small black pip into the V at the end of the barrel, he sighted straight into her left eye. There was a satisfying 'Click' as he pulled the trigger

And Mohammed went berserk.

He leapt up shouting, 'Never point a gun at anyone – ever. It doesn't matter whether it's loaded or not,' he ranted, adding a little unfairly as Ali didn't know how, that he hadn't even checked if it was unloaded first. 'You could have killed her,' he finished with a growl.

Ali could feel his tears forcing their way to the surface, but instinctively knew he should not cry – pouring weakness onto stupidity would only fan the flames of his father's fury, and with effort he forced control over himself, then looked up.

What he saw surprised him. Instead of the burning coals of his father's ire that he was expecting to see, worry and fear shone in his eyes.

Mohammed snatched the rifle away. 'I am confiscating it for a week as punishment for your stupidity. You foolish child. I thought you would behave responsibly, Ali. You could have killed her.'

The last vestiges of Ali's birthday mood evaporated – it was the best present he had ever been given, but the humiliation in front of his mother, brother and sister was making it the worst birthday of his life. The urge to cry threatened to overwhelm him again but he managed to transform his lips into a pained smile which he hoped his father would interpret as manly and strong.

Seeing how upset his son was, Mohammed relented. 'Perhaps I have been a bit harsh.' Turning to lock the gun away in the cabinet, he glanced back over his shoulder. 'At dawn tomorrow Ali, we will go into the orchard, where you shall have your first shooting lesson.'

Ali slept in a fever of anticipation that night, coming fully awake an hour before first light. He could hear muffled noises coming from the kitchen and getting out of bed, he crept downstairs, lifted the wooden latch, then pushed the door open silently – to find his father standing motionless, the gun mounted to his shoulder, levelled straight at him.

He froze in shock, transfixed by the black eye of the rifle barrel which stared back its emptiness, unblinking.

'Terrifying isn't it? That's how it feels to have a gun aimed at you,' Mohammed said as he dismounted the weapon, which broke the gun's mesmeric hold, granting Ali the function of his limbs.

They sat in stony silence as Mohammed drank two small cups of coffee. Then he stood up abruptly. 'It is time,' he announced, picking up the rifle.

As they walked into the orchard, Ali asked excitedly, 'Papi, it's still dark. How will we shoot?'

'There are some important lessons you must learn in life, Ali. Many of them can only be taught by Allah, all praise to His name. But now I am going to give you one of the most important lessons a father can teach his son. From today, you will no longer be a boy,' and with that strange statement he lengthened his stride, quickening the pace.

Ali trotted alongside him as they made their way up a beaten earth path which wound through their twenty-acre fruit orchard. When they were half-way up the slope, Mohammed halted at a small clearing in the trees. 'This place is perfect.'

It was still dark, though not black. Ali knew exactly where he was, but in the half-light that announces the onset of dawn he could barely make out the silhouette of the trees twenty paces away; the only thing he could see clearly was his father, standing on his left.

He began to wonder how he could avoid disappointing him. 'It's too dark. I'm going to miss,' he worried.

'Now watch me carefully,' Mohammed's voice resonated in the stilled mystique of pre-dawn. 'These are the bullets and this is the breech where you load them. This here is the safety catch, and only when you are about to fire, should it ever, ever, be pushed forward.' Mohammed clicked it back with an exaggerated motion of his thumb, so that Ali could see it was on "safe".

'Now for your first shooting lesson,' Mohammed said gravely, sliding the bolt which eagerly chaperoned a brass cartridge into the breech.

'First I want you to swear a solemn oath, and you will swear it on the soul of the Prophet. Hold out your hands.' Mohammed ordered, tucking the rifle-stock under his armpit to take Ali's small hands in his.

'Repeat after me. I will never point a gun at anyone. Unless I am going to shoot them.'

Ali looked straight at his father. 'I will never point a gun at anyone, unless I am going to shoot them. I swear you this oath, on the soul of the Prophet.'

The gun was now pointing correctly, stock up and barrel down, as his father passed it across to him. Ali reached for it eagerly and as his little hands took up the weight Mohammed pulled the trigger. There was a blinding flash and a deafening bang. The gun recoiled viciously, hitting him hard under his left armpit, and although the impact helped to push him over backwards, Ali was instinctively set on the same trajectory anyway – directly away from that shocking concussion. He threw his hands behind himself to soften his fall then looked up to see his father's expression underscored by a wide grin: his thumb on the safety catch; his knuckles bunched on the rifle-grip; his index finger curled tight around the trigger.

'Never aim a gun at anyone, unless you intend to kill them. Now look down here,' Mohammed pointed his left hand at the ground. 'This is why you must obey your oath.'

Ali got up shakily and looked down. Two steps in front of the imprint left by his heels was a jagged hole – fully nine inches round and two feet deep. The dry grass and loamy soil had disintegrated completely, leaving no trace they had ever existed, while fingers of grey smoke reached up for his knees, smelling of burnt cardboard.

'We will go inside and clean your gun, but before we do, I wish to ask: what is the lesson you have learned here today?'

Ali gazed at his father in open eyed amazement – his mind had stopped working, his breathing ragged from shock. He hiccupped, then swallowed the bitter bile that was scalding his throat; as, frantically, he searched his racing mind for an answer to match his shock. 'Is it to expect anything, Papi?'

'That too is a valuable lesson, but there is a more important one,' Mohammed prompted.

Ali could feel his hands beginning to tremble. He quickly clasped them behind his back, hoping his father hadn't noticed. In a numbed daze he shook his head without replying.

'Listen to me carefully, Ali. The world we live in is ruled by terror, and terror is a winged chariot that can fly on the wind, so it comes at you swift and silent. The Chariot of Terror has immense power because it is drawn by the Horses of Fear. There are four. Three are stallions, one is a white mare. Two of the stallions are black as night, the other – invisible. The first stallion is called Fright, and you just met him. He is the easiest of the four to master. To conquer him, you only need to feel the strength inside you for his power to melt to nothing.

'The second stallion is called Threat, and he is not honest – he lies, but not always. You must handle him with great cunning, for he respects nothing less. However, the one to be wary of is The Invisible Stallion. He is the most dangerous of the Four and rightly, no one has ever given him a name because he is fashioned from all the evils of the world. He is difficult to see because he is a coward, so he hides, but that is also his weakness. To make himself invisible, he will often wear a blanket of righteousness to camouflage his real intent, but if you look for him with your heart, not your eyes, you will see him. You must attack him as soon you have a good chance to better him. Never hesitate. But if you cannot see a clear opportunity then you must wait for your chance. As I say, he is the most dangerous of the Four. He is extremely powerful, but like all cowards he prefers to stand behind others and get them to do his bidding. You will find him standing behind an army, never at the front. With him, you must always choose your moment with precision. To fight him, you must use the weapons of wisdom and truth, otherwise he is immortal and cannot be killed.'

The first rays of sunlight glinted over the horizon and Mohammed turned his face towards the lightening sky.

'But fear is not always dangerous, Ali. There is a certain type of fear which is neither evil nor bad. The White Mare is the fastest of the Four and, she is a gift from God. Her name is Flight. You must learn how to control her, for she also has a weakness – she is blind. She can outrun the three Stallions with ease, but to do it, she needs a firm hand on the reins and a clear mind that can react as swiftly as she can gallop. The White Mare is not easy to master, but you must learn it well if you wish to survive in this world. Because someday, you will need her speed and she will need your sense.'

Mohammed slipped his arm through the rifle strap. He placed his hand gently on Ali's shoulder then squeezed it reassuringly.

'I am going to share a secret with you, Ali – a secret you would have uncovered for yourself eventually, so mark it well. The drivers of the Chariot of Terror are men. Never forget – they are men. They use the Stallions of Fear to terrify people, when it is they themselves who are truly driven by them. Shaitan unstabled the three Stallions into this world; Allah gave us the White Mare. The Stallions have the power to paralyse; the Mare has the power to make you fly. Fear can kill you, or it can save your life. You must learn to recognise the Four Horses of Fear and understand all of their moods. You must learn to shoot straight and you must always choose your moment with precision. Learn all these things well and you will have nothing to fear, except the wrath and majesty of the One True God.'

Shocked by the gun, stunned by his words, Ali gaped at his father feeling his innocence draining away through the soles of his feet. When they had walked into the orchard it was a new and exciting game; now the instant violence of the gun, and the meaning behind his father's words twisted together inside him, then knotted tight, as for the first time in his life he thought about having to kill. He realised his father was preparing him for this – getting him ready, because one day he would have no choice.

Without realising he was taking his first tentative step into the Valley of the Shadow, Ali began wondering about how it would feel to choose the exact moment when a person would die; to watch their body collapse, lifeless and still.

The taking of the most valuable gift God had given could be an act of his own hand, at a time of his choosing.

It was the ultimate act – absolute, final control.

He did not have to live in fear. He could protect his family, his loved ones. An enemy's life or death would be his decision. His alone to make, not theirs. And all he had to do to possess this power, to command it, to keep his family safe and protect their farm, was learn to shoot straight.

A heady feeling of omnipotent power streaked through him, which was swiftly replaced by an insufferable sensation of guilt expanding in the void his innocence had left behind – if they didn't believe in the One True God, he would be sending them into nothingness: empty nothingness.

Or, as the Imam had described in horrific detail after the Friday Prayer – to a place far worse.

Slowly, realising his emotions were visible, he turned away from his father.

Little Ali was eight years and one day, old.

THE COURAGEOUS, OR COMPASSIONATE APE

Spinning the helm hard-a-port, Julie pushed the throttles down to put the engines into reverse and a second later the two brass propellers churned the seawater to milk, forcing the boat to crab sideways towards the wharf.

Guiding the Seabelle with only minute adjustments to the throttles, she allowed the cutter to sidle to starboard for three beats of her heart, then eased the twin diesels back into neutral, stopping six inches from the dock – a nautical trick of the professional helmsman, one that few pleasure boaters knew and fewer attempted.

Hopping nimbly out of the cabin, Julie grabbed the spring line and looped it over a big steel cleat before running to the bow and tying that to the dock. Satisfied the boat was secure, she went back into the cabin, turned off the engines then shouted down to William in the ensuing silence, 'Time to get the fish unloaded, honey.'

'Oh lordy, I hate this part.' Will said, trudging over to lift the hatch of the holding tank. He paused to gaze down at the 'fish', which eyed him back with evil intent. The problem with these 'fish', was they had a particularly bad attitude and were extremely well armed.

'Okay, if you net them, I'll put the rubbers on,' Julie offered.

Exaggerating his sigh of relief, Will picked up the long-handled net and dipped it into the holding tank. Swirling it around like a giant spoon, he scooped up four then upended them into a grey plastic tray sitting on the dock.

With an ease that only comes from years of practice, Julie shot her hand past a reaching claw to pick up one of the kicking lobsters. Turning it upside down to make it still, she snapped a wide elastic band around each of its claws then dropped it into the tank of seawater bubbling away behind her. 'Well, at least that one had all its legs,' she looked at Will, waving the pack of elastic bands at him.

'When you said: "Whatever you do, don't forget the rubbers", I thought you were being romantic,' he smiled.

'Rubber *bands*, honey. If we don't band their claws before they go into the holding tank – they fight, ripping each other's legs off. Unsurprisingly, that lowers their value to the discerning men and women who devour them. That's why I told you to throw that big one back.'

'Uh oh.'

'You mean you didn't?'

'I thought you were joking. It's not that easy to tell.'

'As long as you enjoy eating three-legged lobsters, at their full commercial price, then we've had a successful trip. Cheer up darling, that's one down only 56 to go,' she teased, an elfish grin on her face.

'Okay okay. When they're all on the dock I'll band with you,' Will acquiesced, refusing to rise to her bait.

'I'll never understand how a man who can face down boardrooms full of crocodiles, is scared of little old Louie Lobsters.'

'And I'll never understand why a girl who doesn't like getting wet, runs a lobster boat,' Will said, as he swung another netful onto the dock.

'Sssh, she can hear every word you say. And she's not a boat, she's a cutter. She's my baby and she's a good girl, aren't you?' Julie crooned, patting the rail consolingly to mitigate his faux pas. 'You've always got Mom home through good weather and foul, haven't you baby.' She blew it a kiss.

'I sometimes wonder if you love this...this cutter more than me.'

'I don't love her more, but I've loved her longer. Muuuuch longer,' she giggled. 'We've been together for nine years fishing these fine American shores, so you're the new boy on the block. Anyway, you must know I love you coz if I didn't, I wouldn't let you steer her,' Julie smiled her perfect feminine logic at him fondly.

'I sometimes think the pain of getting my thumb snapped off by one of these monsters, is nothing compared to your tender love, my sweet,' he bounced back at her.

'Let's get these lobsters unloaded, then if you wash her down while I finish banding, I'll peel those cold wet clothes off you and throw you into a nice hot bed. Any resistance and I'll clunk a couple of these around your wrists,' she said, flicking a rubber band at him which thunked on his chest.

'Now that's an offer I can't refuse, oh Gentlest of the Gentle.'

Looking past his shoulder Julie did a quick double take. Her smile melted into a frown and she stood up straight, saluting her hand against the slanting sunlight. 'That's a storm coming, Will. A bad one.'

Turning half-around, he followed her gaze to see a charcoaled line sitting on the horizon with herringbone clouds streaming off it. 'Huh, that's odd. I didn't hear that on the forecast this morning. It said medium seas, wind 15 knots tonight.'

'You're right. They were dead wrong. That's a real mother building out there. Come on, let's speed things up or we'll get wet.'

Hours after the sun had gone down and with their passion spent, they lay back in the dreamy silence of lovers.

'I had a curious conversation with Alex Spyder yesterday,' Will said quietly.

'Alex Spyder? He's the head of CrystalCorp, isn't he?'

'That's his day job, but he also acts as a discreet go-between for both Democrats and Republicans, which makes him pretty unique and highly revered. They each accord him enormous respect, mainly because his ideas tend to be right on the pulse of public opinion and, he's never been known to take sides for mere political positioning.'

'Really? I had no idea. What did he want?'

'Don't get too excited, but he asked me a few questions about what I would prioritise, if I were the next President of our great country.'

'What? Well, you're the fairest man I've ever met, darling. You would make a fantastic President. What did you say?'

'I told him my wife used me as a deck hand on Wednesdays, and the office needed me for the rest of the week, so I was far too busy.'

'Don't keep me in suspense,' Julie sat up and shook him gently.

'I said the biggest problem any President faced, was how a few unelected men had got a grip on this great nation of ours; that the power needed to be put back in the hands of the populace.'

'Foolish dreamer,' she prodded him with her fingernail.

'He grilled me about it. How things could be changed without getting myself assassinated in the process. I said there was a large group of like-minded people who would jump at the chance to hand more Federal authority to each State – providing they were satisfied that corruption would be reduced and each stage was given time to bed down and mature.'

'Assassinated?'

'Look what happened to JFK – killed ten days after he started saying that there were people his Office had to answer to; that he was going to expose them and put it straight. Ever since then, it's been quietly understood that if you go up against the real power behind the throne, assassination becomes part of the job description.'

'Anything that's right is worth fighting for, but few things are worth dying for, Will.'

'Fighting always involves risk. Don't worry, the solution is simple: we make sure we have enough people on-board before we attempt anything. Enough to guarantee that cutting off one head won't kill their demon. Assassination then becomes counter-productive, it would reveal their hand and they can only function in the dark. They're terrified of public awareness and rightly so. Shine that light anywhere near them and they scurry off to their murky little corner.'

'I'll kill you if you get yourself killed.'

Will's thoughts wound back to his meeting with Spyder. In his mind's eye he could see Alex looking at him cautiously as he said, 'Give the People the right to decide things for themselves? I recall some Greeks tried that once – worked pretty well. Of course, it would mean a change to the Constitution,' Alex had added, his sharp mind hitting on the practical issue first time.

'When the Founding Fathers wrote the Constitution, they gave our People the right to bear arms to safeguard their freedom. They realised our open society was vulnerable to extreme forms of government, Alex. If the Founding Fathers were alive today, they would be calling on the population to rise up and tear down this sorry state of affairs,' Will heard himself reply.

'There's no doubt that a few dangerous men have got their hooks firmly enmeshed in the political process,' Alex agreed, deciding to share his real concern. 'During the past decade they've ramped up the size of our war machine, for profit. Providing the tools of War is now our biggest industry, Will. It's been industrialised to gigantic proportions – a behemoth, way beyond anyone's control, even the President's. Their machinery is politically protected by a clandestine core of the Republican Party, and its tentacles reach way beyond our military command infrastructure. It currently includes most of our Military Intelligence, chunks of the CIA, a large part of the Stock Exchange and *all* the Investment Banks. Any damn place you care to look is connected to it and reliant on it. Those in control of it have a vested interest in perpetrating and perpetuating warfare, because the profit margins are staggering and the

invoice is secure. There is no client safer or better than our government. I warn you Will, that type of wealth attracts some very serious players, so don't you go thinking they won't protect their asset base, because they can and do. They're extraordinarily well organised, highly secretive, and their machinery is powerful. In fact, it's a deadly thing to go up against.'

'Perhaps there is a way to change it,' Will had countered. 'There are now a lot of people who suspect what's really going on, and many more who feel our social orientation is too lopsided, too self-serving, too inhumane. A third of the country are convinced that Bush knew in advance of the attack on the Twin Towers, while everyone knows the care has gone out of our government. They want it back.'

Julie leaned across Will, cutting into his train of thought. 'What are you going to do?'

'If I'm going to carry a stick as big as that, I think I must tread very carefully indeed; with the utmost diplomacy.'

'How did you leave it with Alex?'

'He asked me if I would bring you over for dinner next week.'

'Oh darling, I'd love to go, I've heard his wife is a scream. You're in Washington on Friday, I'll fly down if you like. How nice of him to invite us over.'

'It wasn't really an invitation.'

'What was it?'

'It sounded like a summons, a summons to the Court of Alex Spyder: the King Maker.'

A clap of thunder shook him awake in the small hours of the night. The storm had moved directly over the house, growling in angry displeasure at a peaceful world.

Will sat up as the windows flashed a steely blue light into the room. He noticed the other side of the bed was empty and in the stark silence following the lightning flash, could hear the sounds of a muted electronic crackle coming from the kitchen below.

With a gnawing concern he jumped out of bed still naked then ran downstairs to find Julie hunched over the pine breakfast table: her face squeezed anxiously between her palms; her head tilted towards the ship-to-shore radio.

She flicked a nervous look at him as he stood opposite her.

The transmissions were fading in and out with the storm: 'We've got seas of 15 to 18 feet and building...We're 4 miles southwest of the lighthouse, over.'

'Roger that Argonaut. Do you need assistance? Over,' replied the voice Will knew was the controller of the Coast Guard station, 80 miles up the coast.

'No, that's-a-negative. We're taking on a little water but we should make it back, over.'

'I'm glad to hear it, Argonaut. We're pretty stretched here as you can imagine, over.' There was a pause then the same voice asked, 'What is your position and status Sea Wolf?'

'We're 23 miles due south the harbour. Same seas, wind 40 knots gusting 65. I've made the decision to pump out the hold, over.'

Julie looked up at Will with worry rioting across her face. 'That's Linton, the Captain of the Sea Wolf. We fished together a few years back. He wouldn't be emptying his hold unless he thought there was a real chance of it dragging them under.'

She snatched up the microphone. 'Linton Linton, this is Julie of the SeaBelle. What is your exact status? Over.'

'Julie? You're not out in this, are you? Over.'

'No, the boat's on the dock, over.'

'Thank heaven. It's wild out here. We're taking on more sea than we can pump. They said it would be winds 20 knots tonight, but it's over double that. We've got foam on the top of the waves now, and if it builds any more it will get murderous. We're close to our limit Julie, over.'

'Okay, I'm staying up to monitor your status and position. Let's say every 5 minutes, over. Argonaut Argonaut, this is Julie of the SeaBelle. Do you copy, over?'

'Copy you Julie. We're 4 miles southwest of the Jenny lighthouse, over.'

'Okay, report your position every 5 minutes. Time now 2:41 over.'

'Roger that. And Julie – thank you, over.'

She put down the handset. 'I need you to go down to the SeaBelle, Will, and warm up the engines for me. Just in case.'

He went stock still at her request, staring at her silently for nearly half a minute; their eyes exchanging countless arguments for and against her decision. They normally used this form of communication to signal their thoughts and feelings when in company, but with the pendulum of danger swinging straight at them, it took on a weightier significance.

A storm squall hammered hard rain against the windows as Julie broke the silence between them. 'I have no choice, Will. They would do the same for me, and the nearest lifeboat is 70 miles from their position. We are only 20 or so, at most. I love you darling, but you must do as I say. I might need every second.'

'Only if I come with.'

'Thank you, I'm sure together we can handle anything...Oh and Will,' Julie called after him as he raced upstairs to throw on some clothes, 'Take everything off her except the charts and life jackets...and drop the anchor into the harbour.'

'I'll turn on the ship's radio. If you're coming I'll know.'

'One more thing, Will.'

'Whatever you need, honey.'

'I'm the Captain on this one. Okay?'

He met her sharp gaze evenly. 'Yes Skipper.'

As Will stepped out of his car at the harbour car park, the weight of the wind hit him hard on his side, trying for a quick knock-down, but he leaned against it in time and ran over to the bucking gangway which led on down to the docks.

The noise surrounding him was painfully loud – the staccato ring of loose wires, thrilling against their ships' metal masts, combined with the mournful dirge of the wind moaning through the larger tackle to sound like the last dreadful struggle of an army being put to the sword.

The sheer volume of sound, together with the physical assault of the gale, raised Will's apprehension and he paused at the top of the gangway to ensure the route to the Seabelle was still clear.

The harbour had been trashed – the black swirling water lumped with untidy flotsam. Plastic chairs and white fibreglass boxes had been tossed from the gangways to lie wallowing in the water, and as he ran his eye along the route to the Seabelle, he could see that the gale had purged the glistening walkways clean and clear.

'The last time the gangways were that tidy, they had just been built,' he murmured.

The harbour boats were not as tidy, they were raging against their bonds. Some were throwing themselves repeatedly at the front of their docks, in a suicidal bid for freedom, and he looked over anxiously to where the cutter was moored. The contrast was startling. The 28ft East Coast Lobster Cutter was sitting at the end of the T dock and he saw how well she was riding the waves being driven in by the storm: she was rising and falling sedately over the four foot rollers; nodding her bow in assent; a line of white foam on her hull adding the grin; and Will smiled with her as he watched her curtsy over a giant six foot swell, barrelling in from the ocean.

'Looks like I'm the only one of us who doesn't want to go out tonight,' he said in greeting as he stepped aboard.

Climbing into the relative peace of the cabin, he tapped the light switch, turned on the diesels, then reached up to the ceiling and clicked the radio into life, tuning it to channel 9.

Instantly Julie's voice filled the cabin, 'Copy that Linton, we're on our way, over....Did you read that Will? Over.'

'Roger that...Captain, over,' he answered, then grabbed an armful of gear to throw out onto the dock.

Minutes later he watched the anchor chain slithering eagerly towards the place it had been trying to get to, ever since it had been put on the boat. As the last link vanished beneath waves he felt a rhythmic beat resonating through the thunderous crashes and bangs of violence around him.

The thumps grew stronger and Will glanced between his legs, in time to see Julie leap aboard and go straight for the helm.

He stood up and slit his eyes against the ferocious onslaught of the gale. 'I can't believe we're going out in this hell. This storm's a bitch on wheels,' William Mann said through tightly clenched teeth, as he felt the stinging rain turning to hail on the back of his hands.

THE PSYCHOPATHIC, OR GUILTFREE APE

Children in a playground can be cruel but children in an orphanage can be vicious past the point of savagery. The constant ache of their loss is sharpened on the lodestone of a loveless survival, to the twin points of anger and revenge, at far too young an age for it not to impact the remainder of their lives. Their impish or chimp-like behaviour, operates at its most powerful in troupes or gangs, and they generally pick on anything weaker, smaller, or different from themselves. Unfortunately for Abdul, he fitted all three categories perfectly. He was only four feet tall at twelve years old and thin, from years of semi-starvation, but it was his eyes which turned him into a constant target for their spleen. Instead of being an acceptable brown, one was green, the other a bright blue.

He looked around fearfully in panic, but there was nowhere left to run. Cornered; with too many of them to fight his way out, he was going to take another vicious beating. The gang advanced on him haltingly, wary of his raised fists and desperate expression. For a boy so small and slight, his punches were painfully accurate and lightning fast. The whole gang had bitter memories of his ability to defend himself and not one of them wanted to take a hit from those weaving hands. A standoff ensued, until the leader of the gang shouted, '3-2-1 get him!'

Seven boys lunged at him as one, but they hadn't seen the handful of coarse sand in his right fist. He flung it into their eyes, blinding three who recoiled, before a surge from the rear of the pack pushed them back onto him and he was quickly overwhelmed. A deluge of punches rained down and he grunted with the blows, making each bruising hit sound as painful as possible. Then the battering intensified, forcing him to stagger sideways, and only with great difficulty did he manage to stay on his feet. Desperately, he battled to stay upright, until out of the corner of his eye he saw the rest of the pack diving over the other boys to attack him, their faces contorted with pent-up hatred. In the moment before they grabbed hold of him, he fell over backwards, pretending to be stricken.

The gang circled him, staring down on their prey which was writhing on the baked earth in agony.

Bashaar took control again. 'Pick him up,' he commanded.

They hoisted him up by his limbs, and feeling their tight grip Abdul went deadweight – taking all the sport out their torment. His nonchalance quickly infected the gang, who began to lose interest in carrying their burden.

Bashaar saw what Abdul was doing and leaned across his captive's limp form. 'I know, let's throw him down the well.' Then he jumped back quickly, pointing and squealing with sadistic glee, as Abdul began to struggle violently.

'Not the well, Bashaar. I can't swim, you'll kill me.'

'We've had enough of your lies,' Bashaar smirked, striding towards the well. Taking hold of the handle, he wound up the wooden bucket from the dark water below. 'Put him in the bucket!' he ordered.

Four boys manhandled Abdul's feet into it, then forced his hands around the rope and instantly let go to watch him swing across the void. 'Oh dear,' Bashaar said quietly; making Abdul grip the rope for all he was worth – he had never learnt to swim. 'All those dates you've eaten are making you terribly heavy. I can't hold your weight any longer,' and he let go of the handle, laughing hysterically as Abdul dropped straight into the black, like a convict on the gallows.

The buoyancy of the bucket combined with its speed to crumple him to his knees as it smacked down on the hard surface of the water, but he just managed to stay inside it.

Jeers and laughter rang down, then Bashaar's black profile broke across his small round patch of sky. 'If you piss or shit in it we won't pull you out.' This was vitally important as they all drank from the well, and his gang nodded sagely at their leader's wise words. None of them had considered that side to it.

'If you admit to eating Hamid's dates, we will come and get you at sunset. Unless you really can't swim,' Bashaar said derisively. 'Then we will have to pull you out with a hook, before you stink up the water.'

Abdul hadn't taken the dates. He felt certain that it was Bashaar and foolishly, had told the bigger boy to check inside his own pockets first – right in front of Bashaar's second-in-command. Bashaar had flown into a rage then rounded up his gang to punish the upstart for insubordination. Abdul had fled, shouting his innocence all the while; but someone had to pay for this theft and it wasn't going to be the Godfather of the most powerful gang in the orphanage.

'If I admit to stealing them, will you pull me out now?' Abdul called up his gambit.

'Course,' came Bashaar's too quick reply.

'Okay, pull me up and I will tell you how I did it.'

'Ha! You admit to it, I thought so. Tie off the handle,' he told the boy on his right. 'Hold onto the rope until we come back at sunset...and don't swim off anywhere,' he quipped, to even greater hilarity from his troupe.

Abdul waited until he was certain they had left him alone to his fate, then began climbing the rope; getting half-way up before the ache in his arms and legs told him he would never make it to the top. He slithered back down, the coarse rope burning the skin off his palms, until his feet touched the bucket and he collapsed back into it with relief. He plunged one of his hands into the cool water, trying to remove the fiery pain, before swapping it with the one holding the rope. The water provided an instant balm, but when he changed hands it seemed to make the pain much worse, and he gave up then began whimpering out loud, convinced he would not make it through the three long hours till sundown.

After what seemed like an eternity, Abdul heard a soft voice calling his name from above. Looking up he saw a small dark head silhouetted against the blue. 'Shhh, say nothing,' the young voice echoed down. 'We must be very quiet, they are nearby. I will try to wind you up, but you must not say I got you out. You must tell them you climbed out on your own. Swear it on the soul of the Prophet.'

'I swear on the soul of the Prophet that I will never say you helped me. Now pull me up. Please, I beg you,' he croaked back. '

It was hard going, but the little boy managed to inch Abdul up to the surface, and as his hands touched the round wooden bar which coiled the rope, he saw the features of his ally for the first time.

It was Ali.

'I thank you for your mercy Ali Bin Mohammed,' he gasped, clambering out of the bucket onto solid ground. 'Come, let us get away from here.'

One month later Victor arrived at the orphanage and took Abdul back to England. He had spent four desolate years looking for his lost son, after the bombing of the Amman Hilton which had wrought havoc on so many lives. It was doubly tragic in their case because it also claimed Victor's wife, costing Abdul his mother.

Shell-shocked and dazed, Abdul had wandered away from the explosion into the slum quarter, where a kindly man found him begging for food and took him in.

The kindness stopped the moment he got him alone. One night and three terrible years of slavery later, Abdul spotted a knife gleaming at him from under the alabaster table opposite his bed. His molester used it for cutting up cakes of Lebanese hashish, which he sold to tourists in the expensive hotels by the beach at a hugely inflated price. In a stupor, the brute had dropped the large knife to the floor before collapsing wearily onto his bed.

Abdul waited until the beast's snoring reached floor-quivering height, then crept over to the table: feeding out his ankle chain with one hand; holding it clear of the floor with his other, to avoid waking the monster. The chain was just long enough to reach and stretching out, he managed to get hold of the sharp point and spin the knife towards him. Standing motionless in the dark he tested the edge of the blade in the tepid moonlight reflecting off the ghost-white table and was delighted to see a thin black line appear like magic on his thumb.

Wiping the blade clean, he stole back under his blanket. He had to wait patiently now because his tether wasn't long enough to reach the man's wooden cot. Wisely, his tormentor had measured the chain and cut it to length, ensuring he would rest in peace.

At daybreak, as the abuser went about his ritual assault before attending Morning Prayer, Abdul slipped his hand under the blanket and took a solid grip on the knife handle. Marshalling all of his energy and concentration, he whipped his arm around and punched the knife into the rapist's side. To his horror the point of the blade jarred on the man's hip bone then stuck fast.

Desperately, he yanked the knife up, then down – trying to force the blade into spongy tissue, and the seven inch blade suddenly met no resistance – slipping into the torturer's side and burying itself to the hilt.

The rapist let out a squeal of agony as the cold steel sliced into his entrails, then began shaking and convulsing as Abdul worked the knife, twisting and turning the blade. With a shocking strength he suddenly grabbed Abdul's wrist and managed to drag the blade out, but instead of resisting Abdul went with it, turned his wrist over to break the man's grip and stabbed the blade into him again – putting all the strength he had behind the blow. The knife found the gap between rapist's third and fourth rib, and with an explosive gasp of pain the monster collapsed sideways onto the bed.

Abdul didn't hesitate. He leapt on him like a cat – stabbing frantically in a frenzy of fear.

Only when certain the man was dead, did he begin sawing through the wire which bound his foot to the chain.

It took him over an hour. Halfway through his labours the man groaned out his death rattle, and Abdul, fearing he was still alive, stabbed the corpse repeatedly – churning the man's chest and stomach into a bloody pulp.

When he eventually freed himself from the shackle, he went over to the bucket of water by his bed, washed the blood off his hands then quickly ransacked the room, but couldn't find any money so he took the hashish. As he put the last lump into a small wicker basket, his eye fell on the oil lamp next to the table. Carrying it over to the bed, he shook the oil out over the body. Stepping back, he took one last look at his torturer, spat on him, then struck a match and tossed it into the mess.

The flames attacked the corpse eagerly. They seemed to purge all trace and memory of the man with their hot, clean breath. All the self-doubt he had harboured inside himself vanished as the heat withered the body, reducing it to nothing more dangerous than roasting meat.

The fire began to roar as it devoured the bed. Statue-still, Abdul stood watching the display. Mesmerised by the purity of the all-consuming flame, while smiling for the first time in three miserable years, he made the solemn promise never to allow self-doubt to question him again. There would be no more sorrow. No more inner anguish, no pity and no remorse. Not for anything, not for anyone.

Not even for himself.

From now on, the only thing he would ever regret in life, was an act not done.

He was so engrossed that he waited until the last possible moment, when the room filled with a thick black smoke, before turning to walk calmly out of the house into the relative sanctuary of the streets.

He managed to sell the hashish that same evening, but didn't realise the value of the money he was given in return. Because Abdul had been brought up in Britain, he wrongly assumed that 10,000 pounds was an enormous sum. But after the dealer had scurried off, he discovered to his horror that ten thousand *Jordanian* pounds would barely buy him breakfast. The man had noted his pallor, and the rest was easy.

Two days later Abdul ran out of money and started begging on a street corner, but he didn't even make it till nightfall. One of the local gangs spotted him on their patch. When he couldn't pay their tax they beat him up in the park next to the Al-Omari mosque; warning that if they caught him at it again, it would be the very last time.

An Imam from the mosque saw Abdul nursing his injuries. Finding the boy was severely bruised and cut-about he took pity on him and drove him to a nearby hospital. As he handed over the money for Abdul's care, he told the doctors it was as much of his generosity as he could afford; that he would prefer them not to reveal his name.

It took a full week for Abdul's bruising to fade to light blemishes. The ward nurse tried every trick in the book to find out what had happened, but when he steadfastly refused to divulge anything about himself, she grew wary and called the police.

The years of trauma had made him suspicious of everyone, and with the knowledge of his recent crime burning a hole in his mind, Abdul told the police nothing, except some vague detail about the bombing – how he was sure it had claimed his mother.

Hearing this the police relented, and passed him into the callous care of the orphanage. They felt it kinder than leaving him to beg on the streets and believing he had not committed a crime, they never recorded the incident. This compounded the tragedy of his life because if they had charged him with anything at all, Victor would have found him sooner.

Ten months later, the policeman who had driven Abdul to the orphanage, noticed the reward Victor had posted in Anmag, the Amman newspaper. When he read the description of Abdul's eyes, he telephoned Victor in England and told him where his son was staying. Unable to get a flight for two days, Victor begged a favour from one of his political friends and they flew over in the man's private jet, landing at Amman Airport the following morning. Though it had been three years since he had last set eyes on his son, Victor recognised him immediately and brought him straight home to Oxford.

At first things went well for them both, as the professor took on the role of teacher to bring Abdul's education up to speed in preparation for western schooling. He was amazed by how quickly his son picked up the lessons, and after twenty months entered him into Public School as a boarder, one year below his peer group.

This however, proved to be a dreadful mistake. He wasn't liked by the other boys and they bullied him. Not with the same sadistic cruelty he had experienced in the orphanage, but they called him 'raghead' and forced him into servitude, deeply wounding his pride.

One break-time a doughnut hit him on the back of his neck, splattering thick red jam all over him. Abdul exploded in fury. He attacked the older boy with a speed and ferocity that knocked him straight down, then as his antagonist rolled on the floor in a daze, he picked up a heavy wooden chair and began clubbing him with it. Fortunately, he was so wild that he didn't aim the blows, or he would have caused serious injury, possibly worse.

Five boys rushed in to help their friend, shouting: 'Enough Abdul, that's enough.' Which did not have the desired effect and it took all of their combined strength to wrestle him to the ground.

The moment only two boys were holding him, Abdul launched himself at the bully again and managed to get in three good punches before they pulled him off.

To subdue him, they pushed him into a wicker laundry basket and buckled the leather straps tight. One boy sat on it and hit Abdul's fingers with a ruler every time they crept out for the straps, as the other boys lifted their injured friend gently onto a bench; carrying him to the school sanatorium with a 3-inch long cut on his arm, extensively bruised ribs and a severe concussion.

'He sort of fell down the stairs,' they mumbled at the matron, which didn't fool her for a minute and as soon as the boy was stable, she reported it.

The Headmaster called them all into his study and quickly got to the bottom of the incident. As the truth unfolded, he was genuinely shocked and more than a little frightened. He telephoned Victor, telling him to come and collect his son, adding that he might have to expel Abdul.

Victor arrived at the school the next morning and listened to the gruesome event soberly, waiting patiently for the moment to pitch his pre-planned plea.

'Look Headmaster, I took him out of a very rough orphanage only two years ago. Why not let me take him home for a week so I can discipline him? As a trained teacher myself, I fully appreciate you will have to expel him if he behaves like this again. But we have a duty to educate all children, do we not? Which should include the more traumatised ones. Isn't that the real challenge of our profession? Why not interview him next week and see if you can take him back? I implore you.'

'Traumatised is an understatement,' the Headmaster replied gravely. 'Twenty-eight years of teaching and I thought I'd seen it all. But the savagery of his attack, and his use of a chair as a weapon is aberrant. Aberrant and dangerous. I mean good God, he could have killed the boy!'

'But he was provoked. And I understand from him, that he has been bullied daily since I placed him in your care,' Victor countered, carefully playing the only ace in his hand.

'Yesss, I too was surprised to learn that,' replied the Headmaster a little unconvincingly. 'Perhaps this is an exceptional circumstance. Two years is little time to adjust to our culture and more civilised way of doing things. Look, I'll tell you what: bring him back after half-term and we'll start again. But if he repeats this behaviour, in any way whatsoever, he must leave immediately.'

'Thank you for your understanding,' Victor said gratefully, before collecting his son from the ante-chamber outside the Headmaster's study.

Four days before the end of that same term, Abdul nearly drowned a boy who had ducked him from behind in the swimming pool. Only the quick intervention of the coach, diving in fully clothed, prevented a real tragedy.

In utter outrage he marched Abdul straight into the Headmaster's office, demanding serious punishment; saying he refused to have him in any of his classes.

Abdul was expelled.

After a turbulent nine months of applications and rejection, no school would take him, and reluctantly Victor took a sabbatical to resume his son's tuition.

In this however, he was not disappointed. He was surprised. The speed at which Abdul could memorise a page then repeat it word-for-word was astonishing.

Victor surreptitiously invited a child psychiatrist over for dinner. After eating together to gain Abdul's confidence they sat on the floor in front of a blazing winter fire and played 'games' before he went up to bed.

When the two men were seated alone, the doctor looked at Victor thoughtfully. 'There's no doubt that his memory is extraordinary – in layman's terms, photographic. He only got two cards from the entire deck wrong. Now that doesn't mean he understands what he memorises, but it does mean he can recall almost anything he has read or seen – parrot-fashion at the very least.'

'That's handy for passing exams,' Victor observed.

'It's handy for passing exams like science, maths or history,' corrected the psychiatrist.

But everything else proved worrisome. Victor was forced to keep him at a distance from the local boys in order to prevent the fighting which invariably broke out. So to make up for his son's isolation, he came home one day with a games computer – promising a different game each month. He was slightly disturbed by the subject matter that his son invariably picked out, all of which had a violent theme, but when he tried to suggest alternatives Abdul would retort, 'Get real Dad. Even Tom and Jerry is violent.'

'As long as you keep up your studies, you can have whatever you wish,' Victor encouraged; desperate to avoid any further confrontation and in the belief that his son was headed for a full scholarship at any university he chose.

The offer letters from four universities arrived in mid-August and they sat down to discuss them. To Victor's annoyance, Abdul announced that he was enrolling at Cairo University to study Computer Science and Economics. They rowed, with Abdul stormed up to his room shouting that in one month's time, when he was eighteen, there would be nothing Victor could do to stop him. In the weeks that followed there were many heated discussions which frequently ended in acrimony. They invariably locked horns, until Abdul began screaming that his father's actions had ransacked *his country* and helped cause the death of *his mother* – a barb which tore into Victor's heart. He strongly suspected his son was all too aware of it.

One rainy morning Victor came downstairs to find a hastily written letter propped against an empty coffee mug on the breakfast table. In it, Abdul explained that he had left for Cairo University and by the time his father read the note, he would already be on the 7:30 am flight. It went on to vilify everything Victor stood for or believed in – how ashamed he was to call him 'Dad'. It had a vicious post script: 'Don't contact me. I'll call you.'

He never did.

Arriving in Cairo, Abdul enrolled and managed to get a part-time job in a restaurant to help pay his way through the three year course. He worked as a waiter and with his spare money he signed up for two correspondence courses: one in America and one in Tel Aviv. Unusually, he chose exactly the same degrees: Computer Science and Economics, but with an emphasis on security software and the protocols which control them.

After getting his Bachelor of Science degree three times over, he got a job as a junior analyst in a Swiss investment bank. It didn't take him long to pick up the nuances of the business and he was quickly promoted.

In his second year, the bank appointed him as the Project Manager responsible for the re-build of a medium sized computer system, that would automate the complexities of the bank's Foreign Exchange Trading division.

It became obvious to Abdul at an early stage, that the budget was insufficient. But instead of alerting his boss, he reduced the scope of the system and took to working late – copying the best parts of the developing programming, then splicing in additional functionality with his own code. As a result, he dramatically enhanced the system that he built, but he only passed on the software the bank were expecting him to deliver.

When the beta test ended successfully, Abdul handed in his notice, stole his employment contract with its non-disclosure agreement, and left.

He went on safari, hunting four of the Big Five for six months, then took his superior software to the competitor banks. They paid top dollar to have his enhanced trading system right away, as they were all competing on the same foreign exchange markets, mainly against each other. A system with far greater functionality, delivering better information 1000 times faster than their in-house software, was an advantage they did not want their competitors to have the sole rights over.

'To make the substantial profits of your competitors, you must compete on a level playing field,' became Abdul's sales close and his company mushroomed rapidly, until one evening, on an overnight flight to New York, the person seated next to him in the First Class cabin leaned over and whispered, 'We have need of you,' in perfect Cairene, the ancient Egyptian dialect of the street.

'How did you know I was Egyptian?' Abdul lied smoothly.

'We know many things about you. We have watched you closely for over a year. We even know who it was that killed your mother in Amman. Would you like to know who he is, and where? Because I am authorised to tell you.'

Abdul fixed a still blue eye on the man to hide his flash of anger. 'Of course I would,' he said evenly.

'He's sitting right next to you,' came the shocking reply.

When the flight took off from Geneva, Abdul had been a millionaire who owned a small software house. But by the time he landed in New York, he had accepted the position of CEO and negotiated a 51 per cent share-holding in a new foreign exchange trading fund. A fund with initial cash reserves of just over 2 billion dollars – the first tranche of money he processed through his new company.

'We must rewrite the software platforms to steal a march on the other trading desks,' Abdul said, as he shook the same hand which had triggered the bomb that killed his mother, thinking: 'One day you will be brought before me to watch your family being tortured. Then after your own suffering, you will beg me to end your filthy life,' he comforted himself with the thought, while smiling warmly at the man and saying. 'It will take eight months to complete and it might be advantageous not to announce that I am the CEO. I wonder, could you arrange another identity for me?'

'That is an excellent precaution. How many would you like?'

When Abdul returned to Geneva he was Abdul-Aliyy Saqr Khalifa – the man who became known for marrying the modern banking system of the West, with the ancient financial network of the East. Hawala, had opened its largest vault to the West for the first time in six centuries – opening it exclusively through him.

Abdul had chosen his new identity in the full knowledge that only those supplying his investment funding would ever know what the name signified. The Western banks, from which he carved their joint fortunes, were unaware at the time that Arabic names all have ancient meaning – so they had no idea to look into it. While Abdul's delighted Arab backers knew it would be foolish to point it out to them – so they never did. In fact, it amused them greatly to know that Abdul-Aliyy Saqr means "The Falcon Servant of the Most High" – extremely fast and rarely seen, yet pinpoint accurate and deadly. In private conversations between themselves, his investors referred to him in code as: 'The Hawk'.

He became fabulously wealthy over the ensuing five years, counting the heads of several government's among his personal friends. He was known to support many charities, especially orphanages, and insisted on meeting the children in person – an unusual act for a man in his position, and more than a little dangerous as the care homes he set up were always situated in war-ravaged, shattered parts of the world.

Mr Khalifa always set one precondition before granting any of his funding: he stipulated that English was properly taught as a language. As he was happy to underwrite this additional cost, his offer was readily accepted; with those benefiting from his philanthropy thinking him exceptionally generous, in both the size of his donations and his extraordinary personal effort.

Then one crisp morning, just as the leaves were beginning to fall in Central Park, Abdul sold every one of his shares on the New York Stock Exchange for 7.1 billion dollars and vanished.

GREAT APES

Julie's voice echoed out of the loudspeaker, cutting through the shrieks of the gale force wind, 'Throw the lines or cut 'em Will. We're outta here.'

A moment later the bow swung away from the dock and she nudged the throttles up, feeling the weight of the sea falling away as the cutter came alive under her feet. Slowly and majestically the Seabelle rose up in the water as she began to gather speed – the sharp prow knifing through the ocean rollers; the low growl of her twin diesels warning defiance at the elemental storm raging against her hull.

'That's my girl,' Julie encouraged, inching the throttles forward. The SeaBelle responded eagerly: lifting her shoulders over the swells; the chaos of the ocean becoming more even as her keel started to slice across the top of the waves with a hiss of contempt at the sea beneath.

'Life jackets on and make sure your safety line is always tied off.' Julie said to Will as he bumped his way into the cabin. 'We're with the sea on the way out, against it all the way back. So you take the helm, Will, while I navigate us in to a mile of their position. Then I'll take over. I'm going to need all my reserves to get us back safely.'

'With pleasure,' he replied, matching her calm. 'What's our heading?'

'One eighty – due south.'

'Julie, would you tell the Captain of this boat, that I love her madly,' he smiled.

'There's no need. The Captain of this boat already knows you're mad,' and they burst out laughing together, revelling in the thrill of their perilous adventure, which they both knew was a long step beyond all but the most experienced of crews.

Julie leaned into Will's back and circled her arms around his waist. 'I love you too my wonderful husband. Don't worry, as long as we pay attention we'll get through this.'

'I don't doubt it, Captain.'

'The Sea Wolf lost an engine. If they lose the other the sea will swamp their boat. So we're going to get them, and as you found out the hard way my love, I always get my man.'

The monotone hum of the VHF radio suddenly burst into life with the most heart rending message that can ever cross the sea: 'Mayday Mayday. This is the Sea Wolf. Julie? Anyone? Over.'

She snatched the mike down from the roof of the cabin. 'Roger Sea Wolf. We're underway. State your position, over.'

'Same position, Julie. We're holding our own against this – just. But we're taking on more sea than we can handle. I don't think we'll stay afloat longer than 10 minutes. What's your ETA, over?'

'We're about 11 miles away, closing at 15 knots. 45 minutes to you, over.'

'I might have to abandon ship way before that, over.'

'How many of you aboard Linton, over?'

'Four. I repeat, four in total. We've got an orange life raft aboard but it won't last long in this, may God have mercy.'

'Linton, you're going to have to stay afloat or we might not find you. Our visibility is 50 yards best, over.'

'Roger that. We've got flares, but with this low cloud base they won't be much use. Then it's strobe light beacons – perhaps 200 yards best, over.'

Will looked back over his shoulder. 'His boat is fibreglass hulled isn't it?'

'Yes. Why?'

'Fibreglass floats. Will the boat float if it's swamped?'

'No, the weight of the engines will drag her down.'

'I see...Well, if the water is coming in from waves breaking over the deck, he might do better if the boat was upside down. Providing they shut all the stop cocks first, the hull will trap the air and give it enough buoyancy to stay afloat. Then they can tie their raft to it. An upturned boat won't move far in this sea, which is the key to solving this. Even if they fire flares we might not see them, *and*, we have a better chance of spotting an upturned boat than a small life raft,' he reasoned.

'Grief Will. Roll the boat deliberately? Only a Landcrab would suggest that. You really are mad.'

'It's roll the boat to save themselves. If they get into an inflatable raft it will shoot off to God knows where in this wind. If anything goes wrong, like we lose radio contact or their GPS gets wet – they're gone.'

'You want Linton to roll his own boat? Then use it as a sea anchor to hold them in position? You're crazy!'

'Yup, like a fox. But think about it: if their boat goes down they lose their sea anchor, and with it – their position. That raft will be driven across the sea and swamped in hours. At current wind speed, it will sail two miles across the ocean in twenty minutes. Then how do we find them? That's four square miles we've got to search, twenty minutes after their boat sinks.'

'All life rafts have a drogue which acts as a small sea anchor, Will. It will slow them down.'

'So we've got to factor-in a 4 knot current as well. That's not making life easier Julie.'

'I've never heard of anything like this, Will. What if Sea Wolf goes straight down?'

'You know it might, but it sounds like it's about to sink anyway. At least they get half-a-chance, and if their boat has enough air to stay afloat it will hold a position. *And we know their position.* We get a really good chance of finding them, instead of virtually none.'

'Is that why you were a director of NASA for so long?'

'Look, it's not working as a boat anymore, but turn it over and it becomes a sealed float. Better still, one that won't move far in this sea. Because if their boat sinks and they get into that raft – they're dead.'

'He won't do it, but I'll tell him anyway,' and she relayed his idea to Linton.

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Let me think about that.'

In the background they could hear him shouting at someone to check the hold to see how much water was in the boat already. A slow minute passed then his voice came back on. 'It's touch and go Julie. We're being swamped every third wave. It looks like you won't make it in time, over.'

'Roger that. We're about 40 minutes away, over.'

'I can't believe I'm saying this, but we have no choice...I'm gonna try it, over.'

'Roger Linton. Fire a flare in thirty minutes, three zero minutes. Then every five. When you see our flare, fire yours. When you hear our engines or see our lights, fire two. Over.'

'Copy that Julie. And whatever happens – thank you. If you don't find us within one hour of getting to our position, you go straight back to the harbour, okay?'

'You're not giving the orders on my boat, skipper. Take all the weight off her before you roll and don't worry – we're coming. I'm putting the coffee on and there's a bottle of rum aboard with your name on it.'

'You're probably our only hope, Julie. Come get us.'

'No biggy, but if you can get into your raft without getting wet, I would appreciate it. I hate having pools of saltwater in my wheelhouse. Out'

'Roger that.' Linton laughed nervously.

'There's a light to port,' Will nodded.

'That's the Argonaut. SeaBelle to Argonaut. Do you read, over?'

'Roger Julie. I monitored your transmissions. So, you're going after them then?' he said, using the sailor's code of being intentionally ambiguous, to avert the calamitous hex of speaking a certainty at the sea.

'I'm feeling lucky tonight. How are you doing? Over.'

'We're battened down and running for port. If I had enough fuel I would have gone myself, over.'

'Okay, report in every 5 minutes. How much fuel do you have left? Over.'

'Less than quarter of a tank. We're down to four knots at 25 hundred rpm. It's hard slogging but we should make it, if there's a God in heaven, over.'

'Roger that.'

'Watch out for rogues off your starboard, we had a small one hit us two minutes ago...And Julie, for what it's worth I've never met a better helmsman than you. If anyone can reach them in this, you can. Over.'

'Thanks for the compliment, but I've always been more terrified of the sea than you. That's all it is. I copy that rogue.'

Julie looked anxiously at Will, who was already scanning the ocean on the right side of the boat.

They now stood in an icy silence of concentration, because they both knew that rogue waves are one of the true terrors of the sea. Contrary to what most people imagine, it is not their size which makes them so deadly, but their direction. Boats ride waves by going over them bow first, and waves travel in the same direction as the wind. However rogue waves don't follow this principle – they come from the side. They can run at 90 degrees to the other waves and flip a boat before the helm has a chance to reply.

When coupled with size they become deadly – instantly. They both knew that where there's one, there are probably several.

The cold hand of apprehension gripped them both as they fell into a concentrated stare, oblivious to the slash of the hail on the windows and the wind howling through the stays.

Julie looked at her watch, then the GPS. '35 minutes to ETA. I think there's some lukewarm coffee in the thermos. Want some?...Are you okay, Will?'

'Aye skipper,' he replied, but a deep disquiet was etched into his face. Before, he had known the calculated risk they were taking but the odds had swung against them with that last transmission.

'Hey, you know what? Why don't you get the coffee while I take the helm,' Julie said encouragingly.

'That's a superb idea.' He was all too aware that he did not have the seamanship to counteract a rogue while he also knew that any chance of surviving one, involved Julie being at the helm.

'And Will, if I shout "Rogue" brace yourself. The ceiling is best, okay?'

'No problem,' he said, grabbing hand holds to pull himself towards the galley. Joining her in trying to ward off the opaque fear that was stagnating the air of the cabin, he asked offhandedly, 'How do we get them aboard?'

'We charm them aboard. With your good looks and my stubbornness, it should be easy,' they laughed together; their bravado adding a ring of hysteria to the sound. 'Seriously Will, I'll hold the boat on-station, upwind of them, while you lower the life ring down then pull them all aboard. How does that sound?'

'Sounds good to me.'

'Make sure you do it from amidships. Don't go near stern, the props will suck in anything that comes their way, including the slack in your lifeline. If you get the chance, pull their life raft aboard. It's always good to have a little insurance, and our raft only takes three.'

Will brought her back a mug of lukewarm coffee and they sipped tentatively, unable to enjoy it. The minutes passed slowly, then as he offered to refill her mug they saw the faint glow of a flare tinting the blackness in front them, slightly off to the port side.

'They're alive, Will. They're alive!' Julie shouted, hitting the fog horn.

Glancing at the compass to fix the flare's position, she swung the helm over, adding 7 degrees to allow for wind and current pushing them off true. 'There's a flare gun in the seat behind the table, Will. Fire it out the door.'

Thirty seconds after his, another flare went up in answer. This time brighter.

'Less than a mile ahead. Get ready Will. Take care out there.'

He zipped up his yellow oilskins, slipped the flare gun into a side pocket, then stepped outside. After the quiet warmth of the cabin, the temperature was shockingly cold.

The deck was heaving and bucking like a lassoed mustang. Will stumbled over to the portside of the cutter and quickly looped the end of his harness rope over one of the stays – knotting it tight then pulling on it, just as Julie's voice came over the loudspeaker, 'I need to turn the lights off, Will. Bang your foot on the deck if that's okay.'

'Clever girl,' he thought as he stamped the deck twice. She was buying a few minutes for her night vision to return, before they came up on the little raft.

Another flare went up. This time Will caught a snatched glimpse of the upturned hull, gleaming shiny grey against the blackness of the sea. It was the Sea Wolf. Upside down 150 yards away.

He raised the flare gun to fire the reply, aiming slightly behind the SeaBelle so as not to blind Julie at the helm. It lit up the sea like daybreak and fifty feet from the overturned fishing boat, Will saw the fluorescent orange life raft twist violently over a foaming wave, before it was plucked from view by the gaping trough in its wake.

He immediately went through the process of fixing the raft's position, by lining it up with the... 'Damn it's right over the point of the bow. How the hell does she do that?' He spoke in genuine admiration, because considering the irresistible roll and push of the waves, together with the sideways suck and slide of the troughs, her unerring helmsmanship was almost magical.

'I'll come up against the wind, Will. Okay?'

He stamped his foot again to signal he understood.

Julie circled around the upturned fishing boat then straightened her course, heading to where she had last seen the raft. They went surfing down the back of a giant thirty foot wave at breakneck speed, then

as they crested its bigger brother, following immediately behind, Will looked down and saw the small craft wallowing in the trough below them, 30 yards away.

The throb of the engines changed their pitch to a scream as Julie backed down on the throttles, making the cutter swerve to windward. 'Let's do this in one go, Will. I'll put them in the lee of us. The SeaBelle will shelter them from the wind and should iron out the sea a bit.'

He just had time to grab the stay in front of him as the engines revved again, then died back to quarter throttle.

One-handed, Julie spun the helm to full port, then full starboard, and the cutter pirouetted neatly, sweeping across the front of the little raft which disappeared from view.

With her right hand poised under the throttles, she counted slowly. 'One thousand. Two thousand. Three thousand,' then slammed the throttles up hard – unleashing the full might of both diesels.

A second later the SeaBelle reacted: her bow lifted, then reared up in the water; her exposed hull shuddering and banging against the onslaught of the waves.

Julie was ready, no longer steering by sight, but feel. The moment the cutter dropped its nose, she pushed the throttles up to full ahead, counted to two, then set them running at one third.

The SeaBelle obeyed – falling back onto the ocean, spray erupting from her bow. Then she dug in her heels, holding a position.

Setting her teeth against rage of the sea, the cutter went stationary in the exact same moment that the little raft bumped against the side of the boat, right below Will's feet.

It was miraculous – a feat of helmsman-ship so deftly executed that she might have been picking up a swimmer on a choppy lake, not fighting 60 mile an hour winds and giant foaming waves.

The full force of the gale hit Will on his back, but the hull of the SeaBelle was now smoothing out the waves towards the raft; taking the task of getting the men aboard from tricky to fairly easy.

Julie flicked on the outside lights and Will looked down. The men were shivering in the raft ten feet below him. One had a coil of rope in his hand and threw it up to Will. He caught it then pulled the raft against the SeaBelle and tied it off. The seaman were safe – the cutter was now closeting the smaller craft like a concerned mother swan, brooding over her wounded cygnet.

He shouted down to the men. 'You're tied on. Cut the line to the Sea Wolf.'

As one of the fishermen leaned over with his knife, Will unhooked the red and white life-ring and lowered it into the raft; waiting patiently while a fisherman pulled it swiftly over his head and down around his waist.

Leaning back, Will took up the strain. His resolve gave him strength and hand-over-hand he pulled the fisherman straight up to the level of the deck, where the man took a firm grip and rolled onto the Seabelle.

Getting up in one fluid movement, he stood beside Will: handing him the life-ring with one hand; slapping him on the back with his other. His mood was infectious and they grinned as they lowered the lifesaver for the next man who was waiting with his arms outstretched.

With both of them working the line they swiftly brought up the others. When they were all safely aboard, Will untied the rope holding the raft against the Seabelle then passed it to the fishermen. 'Better bring your life raft aboard – otherwise we'll need it.'

They brought it up quickly, two fishermen lashed it down securely, despite the best efforts of the gale to kite it away. Their hands danced over the ropes, dropping in half- hitches with an economy of movement that harmonised with the roll and pitch of the deck.

'That'll still be there when Hell freezes over,' said the man standing next to Will as they watched the others. 'My name's John Fitzpatrick. But after a few beers, my friends call me 'Fish.' Thank you. Thank you for saving my life,' he held out his hand.

Without replying Will shook his hand warmly, there was nothing to say.

The others straightened up from their task then offered their hands too, before they all jostled their way into the cabin.

Julie watched them step in and shut the door. 'Where's Linton?'

'He never got off the boat, Julie. He told us to get in the raft, then he turned sideways to the waves and rolled her.'

'You mean he was washed overboard?'

'He said he'd swim out, but he never appeared,' said Fish.

'We didn't see him get off the boat, or get washed off...But he must have drowned by now,' added the third man, looking down at his feet.

'Maybe not,' Will said. 'The boat's still afloat so it must have air trapped in the hull. If Linton has any sense he would wait there for us.'

'We're going to get him,' Julie said firmly.

Will heard the steel ringing in her tone, he knew from past experience it was futile to argue against – not even crystal clear logic could bend it a fraction.

Julie locked eyes on the fishermen, who were gazing back at her with a different unspoken thought. 'I don't care whether he's dead or alive, he's coming back with us. That's final,' she added staring straight at Will as though he were the only person in the cabin.

'Yes Captain,' he answered her cue. 'What's the plan?'

'I'll re-position the SeaBelle upwind of the Sea Wolf while you swim over and get him out. These men will belay you on a rope and pull you both back afterward. Simple,' and to signify an end of the discussion, she turned back to the helm and pushed the throttles up.

'When the Captain's in this kind of mood, it's quicker to do what she says,' Will smiled sheepishly at the others.

Standing amidships, Will stripped off his clothes until he was down to his T-shirt and boxers. Fish tied a rope around his waist then reached into the raft to pull out a rubber torch. 'Waterproof,' he said, switching it on before tying it to Will's wrist. 'One tug on the rope for slack, three pulls and you'll be back aboard before I can drink a shot of tequila,' he winked.

Will just nodded. He was sucking down deep lungfuls of air.

Julie's voice came over the loudspeaker. 'I've got her steady. Watch out for the props, Will. I love...' and she cut herself short.

Without wishing to think about what he was going to attempt, Will clambered onto the heaving rail and stood up straight, just as a monstrous wave lifted the stern of the boat – canting the deck violently to port, then starboard. He lost his balance and fell over backwards, his arms windmilling uselessly.

Two fishermen stepped straight underneath him and managed to catch him before he hit the deck. Without pausing they lifted him bodily onto the rail then held him upright against the force of the gale.

Will took one last breath, then dived as far as he could stretch from the side of the boat – kicking hard the moment he hit the water, knowing he had to get clear of the two spinning propellers.

Compared to the icy chill of the deck, the sea felt surprisingly warm and 30 strokes later his hand bounced off the Sea Wolf. Putting his ear to the hull, Will rapped on it with his torch and listened. There was a pause, then a muffled thudding reverberated back – Linton was alive.

Will pulled himself towards the source of the sound. A few bangs later, he had Linton's exact position.

Swivelling around he flashed his torch at the Seabelle, and along a furrow of the wind, heard a faint cheering coming back from the fishermen, before the howling closed around him again, shutting it off.

He hyperventilated for twenty seconds to fill his blood with oxygen, gave a single tug on the line then clamped the torch between his teeth and submerged vertically. The noise of the gale cut-off instantly, replaced by the quiet calm of the deep.

By moving his head only fractionally, Will found he could swivel the torch in a fairly wide arc and, as the boat rocked away from him, he aimed the torch beam down to see the ship's rail gleaming in the dark, three body lengths below his paddling feet.

Doubling over he went straight down, grabbed the rail then pulled himself around and up like a high bar gymnast. His head banged against the coarse wooden decking and he used it for balance, holding himself upright with both hands flat against the deck, as he swept the beam around searching for the cabin door.

The scene the torch lit up was surreal. The natural order of things had completely reversed, causing him to double-take. Anything not attached to the boat had gone to the bottom, making the deck appear strangely naked. While anything still attached hung down limply, when it should have been hanging – up. The chaos of a tangled fishing net was twisting in sartorial contrast to the straight lines of the hawsers; while the long white lines of the dock-ropes billowing out from the sides of the vessel, looked like the tentacles of some monstrous jellyfish drifting on the tide. Silent and ghostly the boat drifted hauntingly, the rhythmic lift and fall giving it life.

Will tore his eyes from the hypnotic scene, searching for the cabin door. It was to his left and he dolphined over to it – opening the door with one hand, using the handle to harpoon himself inside.

He was urgent now, the burning sensation in his chest growing stronger with each heartbeat. Not wasting a second he shot through the cabin then went straight up the stairwell – towards the sanctuary he hoped was waiting for him at the bottom of the boat.

As he swam up the stairway, swerving around the fallen fishing gear that was taking up half of it, he tilted his head back to aim the torch beam through the murk. A mirrored surface was shining back at him through the gloom. Grabbing the torch in his hand, he arrowed up the final six feet to burst into the air pocket.

When his breathing calmed, he swept the beam around to find Linton's face grimacing at him six feet away.

'Ahh, Linton I presume?' Will said in his best cocktail party voice.

A smile tweaked across the Captain's face – he had the tortured look of a man in extreme pain, doing his best to hide it.

'Are you okay?' Will asked, suddenly serious.

'I think my arms are broken,' Linton winced. 'How are the others? Did you get them?'

'They're all safely aboard.'

Linton's smile broke across his face again. 'I've never lost a man to the sea yet,' he said proudly. 'Though I may be the first, but perhaps that's as it should be.'

'There's nothing like a conflict of interest to really get me going, Linton, and I'm under strict instructions from Julie to bring you back dead or alive. So you're coming with, and if you've broken your arms I don't think there's much you can do about it,' he joked, as he tied a loop in the line floating next to him.

'The waters coming up fast,' Linton groaned. 'We've only got a couple of minutes before she goes down,' and as if in confirmation Will felt the top of his head touch the hull. There had been a clear foot of space when he arrived.

Their sanctuary was turning onto a death-trap.

Linton gasped out through his agony. 'You've got time to save yourself, leave me. Go now while you still have a chance to get out.'

Will lifted an eyebrow and gave the man a singular look, which told the captain precisely what he thought of that idea. He dropped the loop over Linton's head then ducked below the water to shine the torch on the man's injuries. The yellow glow revealed a horrific sight: Linton's left arm was bent sideways at an impossible angle, while his right flopped uselessly from the shoulder down: dislocated.

'Nothing that a hot nurse carrying a case of cold beer can't fix,' Will grinned confidently, putting as much lightness into his tone as he could muster.

It was a lightness he wasn't feeling himself. Linton's injuries meant he couldn't swim out, and he would be very difficult to manage as a floating dead-weight. They had to dive down to the cabin, some fifteen feet below, and the wallowing movement of the boat would make it an un-easy dive. His first thought was to get the fishermen to pull them out, but he instantly dismissed the notion – if the rope snagged it could trap them underwater, drowning them both. He cursed himself for not bringing a knife and was about to ask Linton for his, when he decided against it. There was too much debris and loose tackle in the way; the chances of the rope not getting caught-up were next to nil.

'Okay Linton, ten deep breaths then I'm going to swim us out of here. Bite onto my shirt and don't let go, whatever happens.'

Linton nodded acceptance through his pain.

'When we break surface, I'm going to hold you against the hull until we get our breath back, then your shipmates can pull us the rest of the way. Ready in ten?...Go.'

He stepped back and felt Linton bite onto his shirt just below the neck. They submerged. Will gripped the rail of the stairwell in his left hand while twirling in the slack rope with his other arm. When certain he had it all, and the line was centred down the stairwell, he gave a desperate push with his feet, trying to glide down to the cabin below.

They got a third of the way down before their collective buoyancy pulled them up against the angled ceiling; they began to inch back towards the bottom of the boat.

Will started kicking frantically and managed to reverse the pull, but it wasn't enough and the effort had burnt his oxygen to the point of agony. Just as he decided to go back to the air pocket, Linton started kicking with him and they began to descend, slowly.

With the claws of oxygen starvation tearing at his chest, Will did a quick calculation of the remaining distance against his oxygen burn rate – really, the rate of his mounting pain against the final ten feet of descent. In shock he suddenly realised how close this was going to be.

Throwing his hands out to the sides of the stairwell, Will used the strength in his arms and shoulders to pull them both down.

It worked.

Flying on the wings of near-panic, he repeated the action; forcing aside the insufferable throb of oxygen starvation that was trying to make him breathe.

They were descending, but was it slow going. 'We're past the point of no return, so it's all or nothing now,' Will shouted to himself as they reached the cabin.

Aiming the torch along the rope, he could see the line had curled itself around the wooden spokes of the helm, before going out through the door and kinking over the ship's rail. Swimming over to the helm Will managed to flick the loops off but as the last one came free, he felt Linton relax and let go of his shirt. Twisting upside-down, he just managed to grab the man before he floated away.

Lit from below the yellow torchlight turned the captain's face into a ghoulish mask: his face was waxen; his eyes half-closed. His bluish lips were adding to the nightmare, while the stream of bubbles trailing from his nostrils left Will in no doubt that Linton was drowning.

Frantically, he manhandled the captain through the cabin doorway then looped his arm through the man's shirt and tugged at the rope three times – hoping the weak effort was enough to communicate with the fishermen on the other end.

Nothing happened.

Forcing aside the overwhelming desire to breathe, Will reached up to jerk the rope again when it suddenly went as taut as an iron bar and they began to move fast.

Somersaulting across the deck in an untidy bundle, they hit the ship's rail so hard that the impact exploded the air out of Will's lungs.

He almost let go of Linton.

In angry determination, using sheer brute strength, Will dragged the man behind him as they streaked towards the surface. When they finally erupted out of the water he sucked down deep lungfuls of clean, fresh, heavenly air; each sweet breath making him almost giddy with relief.

Panting with the sheer joy of it and elated at the speed they were doing across the surface, Will rolled Linton face up then humped him onto his chest to get his mouth clear of the water.

As they neared the Seabelle, Will craned his head back and called out to the fishermen; who were lying on the deck, hanging half over the edge as they hauled on the rope. 'Get Linton first. He's drowning.'

Three strong hands grabbed hold of Will, 'Noooo,' he shouted.

'One,' said Fish, and the men hoisted them both out of the water in one sodden lump.

'I'm okay, check Linton,' Will gasped, before turning onto all fours to puke mouthfuls of seawater onto the deck which instantly vanished as a wave washed across the stern.

Gasping and coughing, Will dragged himself up one of the stays then looked over at Linton. Fish was kneeling over the captain's prostrate form, holding the unconscious man's nose and blowing into his lungs.

Moments later Linton choked, spluttered, then vomited up half-a-gallon of sea water– to raucous cheers of encouragement from his anxious crew which were promptly drowned out by three excited blasts from the fog horn.

He staggered over to the captain, who looked at both his arms, then at Will. 'Nothing that a case of cold beer can't fix? You wait till my arms are better and I can get both hands on you,' Linton shook his head in mock exasperation. 'I'm going to hug you till you beg for mercy, then open every one of those beers for you myself.'

Will looked straight at Fish, who nodded imperceptibly. 'Down there in the stairwell, Linton, I didn't think we would make it, I thought we would drown. I decided then that if we did make it, I was going to run for the presidency. So if you like what I stand for, just give me your vote and we'll drink those beers together.'

'In that case, I'm going to need all of my crew to help carry them in,' Linton laughed, then suddenly cried out as Fish reset the Captain's dislocated shoulder by shoving it flat against the deck with all of his weight behind it.

THE ELDER APE

Arriving early, Leah took out her key to Victor's rooms, she was the only student who had one. The Professor had given her a key to stop her banging on the door: 'It sounds exactly like gunfire,' he said, while handing her the key as if it were fashioned from freshly minted gold.

Leah knew that wasn't the real reason but enjoyed the thought that the Professor trusted her, and walking into the small kitchen in the back, she put away the ingredients for their Wednesday evening supper together.

Victor had insisted that if she were going to take up her place at Oxford, while only seventeen, she should have dinner with him once a week to ensure everything went smoothly in her first year. They had settled on Wednesdays, then simply carried on with the arrangement throughout her second, third and fourth years.

She was looking forward to the special treats they had for their evening meal: smoked sturgeon and all the ingredients for a Veal Marsala. An appropriate choice – tonight's conversation would be conducted in Italian. The previous week they had dined on spiced lamb, speaking High Arabic throughout their meal as they batted their intellects back and forth across the dining table.

Victor had offered to pay for the victuals in exchange for Leah going to get them and initially she had felt a little guilty in accepting his largesse, but during the course of her first year had come to realise that the Professor was a wealthy man. 'Though you would never guess that to look at him,' she thought.

Against strong resistance from the Professor, Leah had thrown out the worn corduroys and Tattersall shirts that he wore day-in and day-out for the entire term, without the inconvenient interruption of a washing machine. Leah had made him stand on the ladder which accessed the higher bookshelves, to measure the length of his leg so she could hem his trousers properly. Previously, he had simply cut them off at the appropriate length, leaving cotton threads which eventually grew several inches long, making his trousers uneven as one leg unravelled faster than its formerly identical twin. Victor had put up a token resistance – as near to full approval as he ever indulged.

At first she had thought him highly eccentric, but now knew better. There was a curious, chess-like logic to all of his foibles, and she guessed he wore his old clothes as a form of camouflage to wrong-foot "leech mentality", a term he frequently employed. However, it also engendered sympathy in others, including those less fortunate than he. It was either that, or a hangover from his student days, when like many of his generation he had been an ardent communist.

The old grandfather clock struck the quarter hour and Leah glanced at her watch, smiling as she did, the Edwardian chiming was precisely ten minutes fast. With the exception of his lectures and tutorials, Victor was habitually late, so he set all of his clocks ahead by exactly ten minutes. But this also gave him the advantage of getting the person to leave ten minutes early if he didn't notify them of the fact; together with an excellent early warning of the more control-orientated individual, who liked to arrive on-time then reiterate that their tardiness wasn't their fault – the volume and frequency of their repetition enabling Victor to judge their degree of insecurity with a surprising accuracy.

'Creative, intelligent minds are often ensnared by event, or other people, Leah. They are frequently late. There is no harm in being late, the crime is in not phoning it through,' he told her once; which made Leah ask him, why then, he went out of his way to broadcast an intolerance of bad time-keeping. Victor had only laughed a reply – saying nothing. Her first clue in understanding how he could read people with such succinct clarity operated.

It wasn't fruitful intuition, it was distinctly more logical.

Walking back into the main study she caught sight of her reflection in the gilded mirror hanging over the fireplace. Fetching her bag, she spent a few minutes perfecting her makeup before pulling the clip from her hair to let it swirl around her shoulders.

Leah was becoming an attractive woman. Her green eyes were shot with diamonds and acted as the perfect foil for her high cheek bones and full-lipped, sensual mouth. She half-turned, peering over her shoulder to see how her bottom and legs looked in the light blue dress and matching stockings she had put on her credit card that day. As she cast a more critical eye over her reflection, an effervescent feeling of beauty fountained inside her, causing her to smile knowingly at the mirror.

Her fresh face and seemingly innocent aura, hadn't gone unnoticed by her fellow students. Leah had indulged a few of their passes, but when she mentioned that she was committed to a career abroad and only interested in a "friend with benefits" relationship, they became angry or drifted away.

This was certainly not a fault of Victor's. The first few times they had dined together, Leah had carefully monitored his speech and actions, looking to expose any hint of 'Dirty-old-man-itis'. But to her relief there was no trace of it, and the relationship had blossomed along a different path: becoming more father/daughter than professor/student. She guessed their suppers afforded him the privacy to speak his mind, without his private thoughts being judged or relayed to others; while they gave her the opportunity to view, and gain from, an astounding intellect. Several of the Dons and a smattering of students had queried the regularity of the untoward arrangement, until Leah and Victor scorched their sniffing suspicions with a similar reply, "It's our mutual love...of fine dining", both taking the utmost pleasure in saying it in Italian. Leah anticipated their dinner arrangement with a covetous delight - determined that no one would stand in the way of their mutual love.

Sensing the door opening behind her, she turned to greet him.

'Buongiorno, buongiorno,' he smiled, pushing it shut. The years hadn't bowed him. He stood tall and lean, radiating an easy confidence that was only ever mitigated by his insatiable curiosity. Victor was a man who knew his own mind and lit his own path with the brilliance of intellect. His white hair hadn't thinned during the time she had known him, and his hands were tapered and beautifully shaped – the hands of a surgeon or concert pianist perhaps; but his eyes moved him into the magical: they were bright, soul searching and burning with life. The green one had an unsettling habit of looking deep into her, sometimes questioningly, while the blue one seemed flecked with whatever emotion he was feeling at the time. Today, it looked strangely euphoric.

The forty-seven years between them dissolved into nothingness as she felt his liquid Italian pour into the room. 'I trust all is well. Care for a Negroni?' he asked, as he weaved around the piles of books, heading for the antique drinks cabinet.

'Bellissimo.'

They soon fell into the rhythm of close friends and at the end of their meal, as she poured out their coffee, he spoke into the amiable silence flowing around them.

'Would you mind if we switched into English?' he asked abruptly.

'No, but why?' she queried his unusual request.

'Because English is the most accurate medium for the topic I wish to discuss. It has more words in it than any other language we speak.'

'You mean English has a larger vocabulary.'

'Please don't be anal, Leah.'

'Oh come now, Victor. I'm not the one that spells anal-retentive with a hyphen,' she flipped him back with a smile.

'Precision is a weight I carry – alone unfortunately,' he replied, marking the air with his index finger, as though he were consecrating wine in a cathedral.

'That's funny,' Leah laughed. 'But I detect an ominous tone. I hope the topic's not going to be tedious.'

In an exaggerated voice, he continued. 'At the risk of bringing the ticking of the clock to the forefront of your mind, can we discuss something of particular interest to me? You can let me know if it bores you.'

'I can't hear an Edwardian grandfather clock ticking away behind me,' Leah replied straight-faced, her eyes twinkling mischievously.

He gave a momentary smile before turning more serious. 'The thing is Leah, I want this conversation kept strictly between us. You are not to mention it or discuss it with anyone. And you must never use it in an essay, even if it's one for me.'

'Keep a secret in return for an intrigue? I can't resist. What's the subject?'

'Democracy actually.'

'Tick Tock.'

'Ha! Well, it's a dirty little secret of mine, but I've fought for democracy all my life...'

'Victor, that isn't really a secret. Your work with many shades of government; that you frequently advise political parties in opposition is known by everyone. With the exception of a small tribe in Indonesia, and your cleaner.'

'Yes, I did rather well retaining her, didn't I? And your misplaced flattery is welcome, but what I mean to say is that democracy is something I've fought for, perhaps even helped engineer for a great many people. But I now think I have made the most dreadful error.'

Sensing he was genuinely concerned, she reached out in a softer tone. 'I don't see what you can mean by that, Victor.'

'I may have overlooked something – something highly disconcerting.'

'Nonsense, you should feel very proud of your accomplishments. What on earth—'

'I'll tell you,' he cut in, cocking a still blue eye at her. 'A few years back, I stood on the podium with Al Gore in South Beach Miami. It was his last rally, the weekend before the Presidential elections. He was undoubtedly going to win. The two sound-bites I most remember were: "The only person who can beat Al Gore, is Al Gore" and "Bush's mouth is where words go to die". They summed up the political situation perfectly – no one ever doubted that Gore would triumph, he was the clear front runner. However on the following Monday, I motored up to North Miami to have breakfast with an old student of mine, then when I drove back, I hit road block after road block. You see, it was polling day and the police had cordoned off sections of Miami to channel people away from their voting booths. I saw it with my own two eyes and that's when it dawned on me.'

'What dawned on you?'

'That it was possible to hijack the democratic process in a modern Western country. I'd seen it before in smaller, mainly third world countries, but never in one with a free and open media.'

'I do remember hearing a few rumours.'

'Governor Bush - that's his only elected title to my mind - became the world's new leader with only one state trip abroad. Leah, here's the thing: I know who it was; I know who planned and executed that Republican coup d'état.' He stared at her, steeling himself for his next disclosure. 'You see, I taught him. To my eternal shame, I taught him too well. He was an Honours student here at Oxford some years ago,' and with that, Victor got up to pace around the furniture and books in a measured gait, his head bowed. After pausing to gather his thoughts, he aimed a low voice at the floor in front of him. 'It didn't take me long to find out who had orchestrated it. Both fortunately and unfortunately, my work has given me unimpeded access to the great, the good and the ugly. I knew the skills set required and few possess it, thank heaven, so it didn't take me long to narrow the list down. What took far longer was getting it verified independently, before I confronted him with it.'

'And you feel...guilty?'

'Yes dammit, I do!' he said angrily, throwing his arms out before letting them fall limply to his sides. 'Well no, not really. Perhaps there's a piece of me that feels a small pride in what he accomplished, and I suppose I should be grateful to him for opening my eyes. He proved that it really could be done, then executed it with an ease and simplicity which belie the complexity of the task. Luckily for us all, he put a type of corporate mafia in command – a gangster government, more interested in pursuing wealth than flexing the bicep of real power. But what if he hadn't? What if someone Stalinesque had taken control.' Leah gripped the arms of her chair involuntarily as the full import of his words detonated inside her. She had spent thousands of hours with the Professor over the last four years, either socially or professionally, and had got to know him well. He didn't lie. He didn't even embellish. If anything, he had an inhuman desire for accuracy that he ferociously instilled in all his students. This understanding, together with her recently acquired Masters in Political Science, gave her the insight to take in the enormity of what his simple statement actually revealed. As her thoughts raced ahead of the implications, a violent crack tore apart her perception of the world.

Teeing all the ramifications together, she felt her mind go teetering towards the edge of the solid platform of democracy, that she had known and always believed in, then it fell off and dropped straight into the gaping maw that had opened beneath her.

All of the principles she had taken for granted in western democracy, all of its robust supports vanished, as she tumbled into the void. She could feel her mind spinning helplessly. Spinning through a nightmare, a nightmare without haven, without security, without even a handhold on the smooth speeding sides of the aching chasm.

She blinked away the queasy sensation, took a sip from her glass to restore her equilibrium then using a measured voice to mask her trepidation, replied, 'Stalinesque? At best it would reduce Western freedom to a has-been. But if other leaders realised what Bush had pulled off successfully, it could be apocalyptic.'

'The possibility can't be ruled out. My view of the world changed with that election. Up till then I had always believed in pushing democracy into the world. Afterwards, I realised that democracy is also a perfect tool for manipulating the masses, to feed the hunger of a few determined men.'

'Not quite, it's not,' Leah countered, gathering her wits about her. 'One person - one vote, is understood by everyone. It's a concept that's hard to challenge.'

'Certainly you wouldn't want to challenge that!' He pointed his finger straight up. 'It's more subtle, Leah. They use the ideal of democracy, hold it up for all to see and admire, whilst diluting the power of the individual's vote.'

'And just how do you go about doing that?' she asked slowly, aware she might not like his answer.

'Don't forget, the idea has to be simple for a politician to grasp it. Unfortunately this one is disturbingly simple: you unite countries and give everyone a vote in a single government. Like say, the European Union.'

'Oh God, that does dilute the strength of each vote.'

'Indeed it does. Any dissent along the way and you simply throw fear into the populace to regain control of the Ship of State. Some years ago I, with one or two others, were asked to submit a government structure for the EU that would take it through the next 200 years. We settled into the work, and all was going well until it was abruptly dismissed by the European elite, after interference from that cabal of bankers who privately own the Federal Reserve Bank.'

'*Privately own?*' Leah queried. 'The Federal Reserve Bank is privately owned? But the Fed sets the interest rate and most of us have debt. It provides our money in exchange for government bonds, government debt, which we all have to pay for. That's horrific, it can't be...'

'It's true alright. It's privately owned by three commercial banks and a number of occult individuals. I use the term occult accurately, because there is no official record of the Fed's ownership while its sinister implication is just as relevant. It took me two years to unearth their names. The knowledge of who they are is one of the most disturbing things I have ever had the misfortune to know.'

'Disturbing? It's disgusting. The Fed plays the same role as the Bank of England.'

'They differ in one way. When the Fed sets the interest rate for the US, the rest of the world is forced to follow at some point.'

'That's absolutely vile. I'm horrified.'

'Are you? Well welcome to the real world, Leah. A world that only a privileged few ever get to discover.'

'But it puts the owners of the Fed in a position of enormous wealth and power. It gives them a vested interest in making the US Government borrow more – a profit motive for war, for calamity.'

'They do wield enormous power worldwide. Directly or indirectly, everyone works for the Yankee dollar. But the Fed doesn't only profit from calamity. It's true that when the US is at war, the government is forced to borrow more from the Federal Reserve. During the naughties, the Cabal were instrumental in convincing our politicians that money had become electronic; that it was in limitless supply; that you could borrow as much as you wanted then repay it from the increased tax revenue resulting from the growth it provided.'

'You mean they deliberately inflated economies?'

'Partly, they deliberately inflate, then deflate economies. Inflation is not accidental, Leah. Mostly, it's the result of a deliberate act. To prevent people rebelling against their greed, the Cabal ration themselves to one financial collapse per generation. Money is a tool of Man, but when it comes with interest attached, it also comes with debt attached. Every time money is released into an economy, that burden of debt comes with it. On average base rates, it means our money halves in value every 14 years. Simply put: it's modern-day slavery.'

'I'm not sure it is the same as slavery. You must feed and house your slaves, they've found a way around that cost. We all have to support ourselves. Most of us are forced to borrow money to buy a house, a car, almost every damn thing. We work hard to pay off that debt.'

'You begin to see it, Leah.'

'See it? It turns the medicine of money into a carcinogen,' Leah slapped her hand on the table.

'You can get annoyed but it won't do any good. The answer lies in the political process; otherwise the owners of the Fed stand as inviolate as they are invisible.'

'I'm not annoyed, Victor. I feel like I've been conned. Sorry, *being* conned. I'm flat furious.'

'Then you'd better calm down, because I'm sorry to say it gets much worse. The Fed Cabal have a grand design for the world and are on a straight course to rule it. What am I saying? They already do. But their control isn't absolute, not yet. When they found out what we were proposing for the European Union, they stepped in and changed it. They suddenly appeared one day, the bitter sediment in the chalice of Mankind: cajoling, promising wealth and power to selected leaders of Europe. They know how to tempt and they don't let anyone stand in their way. So now, in accordance with their strategic design, the President of the European Union is a non-elected Office, which reduces Western democracy to the same level as China. 350 million people, electing 750 representatives who have even less accountability back to the people. No politician can resist that gilded carrot. It's their dream ticket.'

'Are you saying this Cabal are planning to finesse control over our own destiny?'

'If you think about it, they already have – they've usurped it. By uniting large swathes of the human population under smaller government, people become much easier to control and manipulate. Our opportunity to change things, diminishes radically as our vote is diluted.'

'Ouch. That principle is true. The Million Man March on Washington failed to achieve anything, but when 250,000 march on Downing Street something gets done.'

'Or they simply lie about the number marching on Number 10,' he laughed. 'You've put your finger right on the button, Leah. Once a country gets beyond fifty million there is a dramatic change of control. Look at the democratic countries which are the most liberal – i.e. those furthest away from a police state. The facts strike very hard because they are all under fifty million. Look at Spain and Portugal before EU integration, or New Zealand and Australia now. Then consider America, China and Russia.'

'That's cheating a little, Victor. You're picking out countries which don't have the death penalty.'

'Not intentionally, but isn't it curious how that completes the circle,' he glanced at her in mid-step.

For a long moment the echo of his reply threw a ghostly pall over the room. Victor, deciding to break its spell, walked quickly to the dining table and reached for the decanter to refill their glasses, draining his with a single gulp. Leah followed suit.

The smiling contented genie of their earlier evening had chameleoned into something more sinister – Draconian. The atmosphere in the room went from chilling, to chilled. The Dragon had slipped into the room, to listen.

Leah could see its shape forming in the ether between them: serpentine and sharp-fanged, it exuded an aura of unspeakable power and vicious speed: omnipotent and unstoppable. She could sense the weight of its sheer presence, a presence that reduced a person to mere on/off mortality.

Unlike the Dragons of legend, this one had no name: it's very anonymity cloaking it with unspeakable power. A nameless void with absolute control. As she saw it more clearly, the possibility slid into probability that if another totalitarian state were to materialise, it could emerge from, then take-over, a democratic country. Or perhaps be the result of a united Europe – the very last direction you would expect it to spring from. Another of her father's sayings surfaced in her mind: 'When disaster happens at sea, it often comes from behind you.' But deciding on fight over flight, she picked up the weapon of her mind and marched out to do battle with the monster.

'Victor, if a detailed understanding of the problem is half the solution, then what is the solution?' she asked, clicking one of her fingernails on the dining table in time with her words.

'Mankind stands at a crossroads, Leah. To our right Capitalism: anything someone else has – I want. To our left Socialism: anything I have – someone else must pay for.'

Leah laughed. 'There is no alternative.'

'Actually, there is. Have a look at coziownit.com. Like that site, the harmonious future of Man lies in a new direction, but unfortunately human suspicion won't permit a new direction unless it's very well

signposted, the problem being that signposting takes decades. So it might be safer for us all, if the power of certain governments were reduced.'

'Do you really think we've lost control of our controllers?'

'I do. The disconnect is almost irreversible, though not quite, I have a couple of ways to spike their ambition. By issuing money with interest attached, all governments end up working for the Fed Cabal. But as you well know, all empires crumble eventually: Roman, Persian, British, and it always ends the same way – they break into much smaller countries. It's as if the natural desire of Mankind is for smaller governance, not larger. Once free of the yoke, people shy away from impersonalised government and demand something which gives them a much louder voice; and therefore, greater control.'

'It's true that smaller populations have a bigger percentage of the vote per capita,' she agreed.

'That is a fact kept well hidden by both the Cabal at the Fed and most of our politicians, which is why they seek larger numbers of voters. Both the Cabal and our politicians crave only one thing – power over us. The more the merrier, and if you're already at the top of the pile, the only way to feed the craving is to have greater control over more people – which also reduces their accountability. It's the most delightful duality. It's a heady cocktail that most politicians will grab at, with both sweating palms.'

'If you don't refill the glasses soon Victor, I run the risk of making their actions seem polite,' Leah said, without a trace of humour.

'A thousand pardons, my dear.' He half filled her glass, adding a splash of soda to his own before heading off on another circuit of the room. He didn't speak again until he waded past the chess set.

'Unfunny enough, one of the best indicators we have, is that unless it's a crisis fewer of your generation are bothering to vote. It's not apathy. They feel their vote won't accomplish much. Besides, where is the joy in choosing between the lesser of two evils, or having to select one minor party from a hodgepodge-rabble, spouting bipolar rhetoric? Once you get beyond fifty million the populace feels impotent. However, what isn't widely known is that the collective human mind is the most accurate computing mechanism we have. It's scientifically proven to work and it's called the "Wisdom of the Crowd". It was first discovered in 1907 when the crowd correctly guessed the weight of an ox, while more expert opinion floundered.'

'So you think this is a trend rather than a blip? That politicians will actively seek larger numbers of voters?'

Victor looked at her sharply. 'Even at the level of company law, that is illegal. There must be voted agreement between all the shareholders of a company before their percentage can be diluted, or the directors face jail.'

'Well, let's not get too carried away. That's what referendums are for.'

'Supposedly, but how often is the populace denied a referendum? Or have the argument spun to them in such a way that they will even go to war, when the reason is known to be false. Though to be fair, that's not a difficult thing to arrange with today's mass media.'

Leah pushed her glass to one side. 'I know that most Americans are scared of their Government and its agencies. I'm not sure they are apathetic, but they do shrug and say: "What can you do against the American Government"?''

'It's noteworthy they say that, not "Our Government". Which they ought to, don't you think?'

'Well, perhaps it's just a figure of speech.'

'Speech follows thought, Leah; especially subliminal thought. It's not t'other way around.'

'Granted, but your assumption that politicians are driven by a lust for power, has been known to most of us ever since we walked out of an African rainforest scratching our heads,' Leah smiled, 'Referendums are the runaway lane for democracies, Victor.'

'In clever hands, referendums are the opiate of the voting masses. In the wrong hands, they become the runaway train that went down the track.'

'I think you're stretching things a bit, Victor. What about good government?'

'At this moment in time I can't name a single government which I consider safe, can you?.... Look Leah, there are many examples which prove those in power clearly understand the effects of diluting the vote. I can even quote them. Do you recall that after Tiananmen Square, Jiang Zemin, who went on to become China's President, said that if he had to execute one or two million people, it wouldn't amount to much in Chinese terms. The point being that he *could have*; more importantly *would have* carried it out. Now can you see that happening in a country of only fifty million, like Spain?'

'No I can't. Okay, so you think democracy doesn't work when a population exceeds what? Fifty million?'

'I'm not saying it doesn't work. I'm saying it lays fertile ground for abuse or takeover. All it takes is someone clever enough, who is connected in the right way. Until I witnessed it happening to America, right in front of me, I didn't think it was possible; I had no cause for concern.'

'The Land of the Free. Free from the responsibility of controlling their own Government,' Leah joked.

'Yes, it's a blissfully ignorant world, isn't it?'

'Ready to be gobbled up by the next greedy orator to come along,' she quipped, determined to lighten the sombre presence that had darkened the corners of the room.

'One thing's for sure, the next tyrant will only get into power after a weak or despised Government. It's always been that way because people vote emotionally, not with critical reasoning after that type of disappointment. Which then opens the door for any slick-talking bastard to step in and take over. I'm sure you know that Churchill once said: "Democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried", but what you won't know is that I knew several people who questioned him on this. They asked him what its imperfections were, and he steadfastly refused to answer. Mr Churchill was not best known for his silence. He knew democracy had major flaws.'

'Hoping as few as possible would ever learn of them.'

'I doubt Mr Churchill would have stayed silent for long, if he were a passenger on the runaway train that people now call democracy. But unlike him, I insist this conversation stays strictly between us.'

'Of course, you have my word. But you can't assume dilution is what he had in mind when he voiced that.'

'True. But in the established sense, the power of democracy is literally dissolving. We have already moved from open democracy, to a post democratic era.'

He sat down opposite her, clasping his hands together to hammer home his next point. 'Because Leah, I know of nothing more dangerous to the future of Mankind than large populations losing control of their governments. Especially ones with overkill nuclear arsenals; several secret law enforcement agencies ready to go, and a turnkey military champing at the bit, waiting for someone to lead them into a fight. Almost certainly, to the unifying call of defending freedom.'

And the Dragon opened an eye.

Victor had found its lair. Knowing him as she did, he was likely to go after it.

He would not go alone. 'Supposing I share this concern with you for a moment, Victor. Do you have an antidote, a cure?'

'I do. I have two. One will be the subject of my next, perhaps explosive series of lectures.'

'*Perhaps explosive?* Your capacity for understatement exceeds the infinite, Victor.'

'Ah, so you did go over my lecture notes as I asked. I was surprised you didn't bring up the subject earlier this evening. I assumed you must have been out on the town, partying with waifs and strays.'

'No Victor, I had to read it through three times before I dared to edit them. If that idea gains any momentum it will change British governance, probably the way all Western nations are governed in future. So yes, it is *perhaps explosive* as you like to put it, but I think *highly* explosive is an inch nearer the mark. Do you really think it wise to deliver that series of lectures?'

'Given as you so artfully put it: "My limitless capacity for understatement", then I rather think my answer ought to be: yes.'

'You do realise our Government will go ballistic if they ever find out what you're proposing?'

He stared at her, his blue eye flashing steel. 'I do.'

'I see,' she replied more cautiously. 'You must realise they will find out about it?'

'I trust they will.'

'Is there nothing I can say to stop you?'

'Not a thing.'

'Well personally, I think the concept is attractive and I expect most reasonable people will feel that way. So when it does catch-on you won't need a fallback solution, because 'We the People' is really the final solution to the political question on everybody's lips at the moment, is it not?'

'Precisely Leah. It is the solution for our current crisis. But it is not a solution for the ultimate political crisis.'

'I can't see how this crisis can get much worse.'

'Believe me it can.'

'What are you proposing? A fallback solution to a dictatorship, to tyranny?'

'I am. I do hope you don't mind.'

'Mind? Of course not. But how on earth do you set about bringing down a dictatorship?'

'It's rather drastic, or as some might say reduced – revolutionary. You see, there is an inherent weakness in strict regimes; in all organised societies actually, even democratic ones. I have been only too aware of it for the past thirty years. With the exception of one other person I have never breathed a word of it – until now.'

'I see, so the person you told is the one that put Bush into power?'

'No no, he's not aware of it. I'm certain, because when I had it out with him I took the precaution of checking first. No, the only other person I ever told was my son Abdul, when he challenged me to use my influence to steer world governments another way. Please understand: I was only trying to build a bridge with him; a connection cruelly denied us by a twist of fate in the Middle East. For a long time we lost each other, then afterwards, he never really forgave me; or forgave anyone for that matter.'

'I'm sorry to hear that. But only family, good friends and lovers can feud,' Leah said resignedly.

'I have two reasons for imparting my fallback solution to any form of government. That's *any* form of government, whether extreme or not. The first is that I do not wish my son to be the only person who knows of it. The second, is it may become necessary to implement in your lifetime. God forbid, but I think a dictatorship will emerge and take over the West in fifteen to twenty-five years' time. The gate they will drive their iron tank of control through, will swing open as accountability to the voters dissipates – a direct result of fewer politicians representing larger numbers of people, while the technocrats take control of the purse strings. The first warning sign will be over-regulation: a surge in the number of minor laws dished out. The second sign will be an escalation of police clamp-downs and the meting out of summary justice, together with the building of Super jails. The last sign will be a rapid acceleration of military spending. Should it happen to Europe first, you will also witness the introduction of the Death Penalty.' He paused. 'I like to think you and I have become close. I know I can trust you, and unlike my son, I know your heart is good. I am greatly indebted for your kindness and consideration of me, so I am sorry to burden you with this knowledge but I must, if only to safeguard your future.'

'You have been like a father to me, Victor. I can never thank you enough.'

'To the Jaws of Death,' he said abruptly, holding up his glass and smiling into her eyes.

'You'd better be twenty minutes late,' she replied. They broke into instantaneous laughter, fired by the need to disperse the weight of the aura that was suppressing the room.

'I'm going to divulge my concept to you now, because I can see the end of my days approaching.' He held up his hand to forestall her protest. 'Come now, Leah, it's only fair that the Jaws of Death toast me at some point...and with their single malt, I trust.'

'Now you're procrastinating, Victor. What did you confide to your son?'

'When talking with the Angel of Death, I imagine procrastination is a very useful skill.'

'Well, if you don't tell me with your next breath, I will speed the introductions myself,' she said, her natural good humour turning up the corners of her mouth.

'There is a possibility that my son will implement what I revealed to him, and forewarned is forearmed.'

'Okay Victor, that's quite enough. I'm touched by your trust in me but if you don't tell me what it was this instant, I will scream you to death.'

'In many ways, he's not unlike you.'

'Ahhhhhhhhhh.'

'Okay calme, calmati. I'll tell you. All societies have a deep fissure, a gap that is filled by the rule of law. The Law is the mortar in the House of all Social Order. Remove it, and the structure collapses. Ordered society falls into a smoking ruin. It disintegrates into rubble – a rubble ruled by the rabble.'

'I'm starting to feel operatic again.'

'Alright, well the medicine has to be pretty strong to effect a cure, so I would start a small war.'

'A small war? Victor, small wars conducted against Big Brothers don't stay small for long,' Leah said earnestly. 'That risks the very apocalypse we are trying to avoid.'

'Perhaps 'war' is too strong a word. Let's call it an attack. An attack against which there is no defence. To ensure it stays small, let's say you limit your force to a few.'

'Are you suggesting that only a few people could take down Russia, China or the United States, without mass casualties?'

'I am. Of course it would have to be a new type of attack – completely original, one the world has not yet experienced or even imagined could happen. It would take time and careful planning, access to large amounts of money and a meticulous intellect to conduct operations. But once set in motion, it won't take long.'

'How long?'

'Oh, a little less than six months, luck depending,' he said, stroking the top of the dining table as if it were a favoured pet.

Leah leaned her elbows on the table then dropped into a businesslike manner. 'How's this? You tell me how you can take down a Superpower with only a small force, in under six months, and I will put myself at ease by shredding your idea.'

'Okay, I'll spell it out for you,' and to her mounting trepidation – he did. Just the idea itself was terrifying, without his clever tweaks and practical ways to implement it. But what surprised her most about his plan, was that it didn't constitute an attack on those who ruled. His target was the rule of law itself.

It was the most destructive mechanism that she had ever come across, and in his own inimitable way he had christened the plan quite inappropriately, but with needle-point accuracy as "The Sword of Damocles".

As she listened to him explain it in detail, Leah saw why he had kept it secret: if the concept ever became widely known, a lot of people would delight in carrying it out.

The Sword of Damocles would scythe down the Law, destroying all social order – destroying it in months, not years. Worse, no one would have any contingency for it, nor could they – once implemented it was unstoppable. Ultimately, this was why Victor had kept it sacrosanct. Because even the architect of the plan had no shield against The Sword, once it started cutting down a defenceless World.

'In the end Leah, the collective thought that rises up from my stratagem will utterly destroy the Law. And with it – the legal system. Even the police will turn against the Rule of Law shockingly fast. The Sword of Damocles will rapidly bring a populace to the point, where no one wants The Law in place – because it won't be on their side, but against them. This will be driven by the fact, that having The Law operating in any form will make ordinary survival difficult, and therefore, you are better off without it. Once that understanding gains momentum – it's over. You must never forget how dangerous The Sword is, because it doesn't need a tyrant in control for it to work. It would roll out just as effectively, if Gandhi himself were the nation's leader. I want you to promise me that you will only draw The Sword if my foresight about a coming dictatorship proves correct. And only then, when there is no alternative.'

'You have my word,' she replied solemnly.

'I have one last request: if I am wrong about tyranny happening in your lifetime, then you must pass on my final solution on to someone you trust implicitly before you depart this earth. Be careful who you entrust it to, more careful than I have been.'

'If there are three people in the World who already know about this – that's three people too many.'

'I am glad you do not underestimate its power, because that means you understand it; will keep it to yourself. Never forget: the simplicity of the scheme means it could be launched by anyone and understood by everyone. Destabilising society only works effectively, when insurmountable force is coupled with a simplistic fear. In this case, that fear is the destruction of all social order as we know it.'

'Before you told me about The Sword, Victor, I never felt knowledge was a burden. Now I understand why you use that phraseology.'

'Personally Leah, I feel a blissful sense of release in handing you this weapon. Because I have now completed the penultimate task in my life. All I need do, is give my 'We the People' lectures to die content,' he said, with euphoria tinting his blue eye again. 'Keep my Sword well hidden, and understand that it is my sincere hope and wish you never have cause to wield it. However, I think the chances are high that you will have no choice.'

Walking back to her rooms later that evening, immersed in her newfound, deeply disturbing knowledge, Leah heard a distant bell strike once, carried from afar by a thick fog which had crept in soundlessly from a cold North Sea.

There was now a sharp sliver of fear in her life, but when she tried to track its source her mind kept reverting to the other person who knew about The Sword of Damocles – Victor's son, Abdul.

Of one thing she was certain: Abdul would never divulge the plan to anyone.

Then again, if Victor was right to be concerned about his son...

But surely Victor's own son would never wield The Sword? Would he? Not unless there was a rope around the neck of Mankind, surely?
It was the one thing she hoped Victor was wrong about.
The problem being that if Victor was wrong, in her experience, it would be the very first time.

THE MONKEY IN THE MACHINE

The sun was just breaking over the horizon when he leaned back in his chair and stretched. It had taken him all week, working day and night, but he had finally finished the task. He had slept only briefly, his concentration maintained by two pounds of Darjeeling tea, half an ounce of Peruvian cocaine and four cartons of unfiltered Camel cigarettes.

He rubbed his eyes wearily, the blue one was throbbing again. Despite his fabulous wealth, Abdul knew it would be dangerous to delegate this job, so he had written all eighteen web sites for his new 'Business Initiative' himself.

Though each site looked quite different, they were remarkably similar in function. He was connecting Arabs who lived in Western countries, so they could meet online and do business, or date, or chat, or find old friends and family. Seven of the sites were dotcoms specifically targeted at the 3 million Arabs living in the United States. There was also an online supermarket which he surreptitiously subsidised by 30% – selling the hard-to-get delicacies of the Middle East then drop-shipping the orders direct to his customers' homes.

Last but not least, there was an investment fund for start-up ventures.

'It shouldn't take long,' Abdul thought.

He was right.

Within six months the eighteen sites were getting 25,000 hits-a-day between them. They even began to produce a healthy revenue, which he used to supplement the shops and businesses that sprang up from his financing, right across America.

The requests for funding new enterprises had come flooding in, and Abdul examined them all. For those fortunate enough to receive his investment, there was an additional requirement: he would send over a representative to work alongside them in the business.

'He will provide assistance and the money when needed. This way there is no need for a complicated contract between us. Our word was good enough for our Fathers; it will be good enough for us,' he would say, before going on to agree the investment capital on fantastically discounted terms. 'It will give the business a head-start,' Abdul explained, making sure he never met his new partners in person, stipulating they conduct all communication only by phone and email.

This arrangement is fairly common practice in the Middle East, but his method differed in one aspect: he liked to pay his business lieutenants' wages out of his own pocket; not from the profit generated – the expected way.

Free help is hard to refuse when you are starting a new business, so most people welcomed the assistance; turning blind eyes to the fact that their companies were being closely monitored.

'As long as it's profitable and no one is stealing too much, there's nothing to worry about,' said Abdul's new-found partners. 'It's only for six months or so, while the business gets going. If it was my money, I would want someone keeping an eye on it. So he reports back, so what?'

'He will be staying with us in our house. So we can keep an eye on him too.'

It was true that detailed reports were being sent to Abdul. He designed two databases on which he kept every piece of information sent. But one was much smaller than the other. The smaller one held the business data, while the larger one contained complete dossiers on the owners themselves: their habits, movements, Social Security numbers, family and friends' names, as well as the passwords to their computer systems. He also had the keys to their houses, cars and offices duplicated, then posted on to him: secretly.

It was surprising how many different types of business there were, but when searched by category, it was noticeable that over fifty per cent were delivery companies while only five per cent were corner shops. Abdul seemed to prefer companies which delivered product – especially mainstream office items and technology. He had twenty-seven computer companies, all supplying their paper, ink and printers to a wide-ranging client base, including banks and Blue Chip companies stretching from coast to coast. There were thirteen import companies, mainly handling food, and seven private security firms guarding construction sites at night.

He really could congratulate himself on a job well done. He had helped to birth 113 businesses in the United States in a very short space of time, beating his most optimistic forecast by a wide margin.

'Phase one is now complete,' Abdul thought with satisfaction, after conducting a painstaking review of his databases one evening.

Getting up from his desk, he wandered over to the tray by the fireplace of his hunting estate in Norway. 'Which means only one thing: I must take up gainful employment again, and soon.'

As he picked up a blini biscuit heaped with yellow Almas caviar, the rarest and most expensive on earth, he realised there was no better place to apply for a job, than the war-ravaged streets and chaos, a few diehards still called Jordan.

UNTYING THE APE OF WAR

The insistent wailing of an alarm crashed in on his thoughts and Ali jumped up quickly. In his urgency, he momentarily forgot the weight on his back and nearly toppled over sideways.

Making sure of his balance with each step, he walked to the left side of the roof to check out the source of the alarm – desperately hoping it wasn't connected to him. Just as he bent down to look over the edge, it ceased abruptly and he went back to his blanket; freezing motionless, as a helicopter clattered overhead to land on the helipad of City Hall.

The Governor of California was arriving in style.

Ali looked at his watch again. Only 6 minutes had passed since he had last checked it. 'I need to calm myself. This is not an easy shot and I only get one,' he reminded himself.

Consciously and deliberately, he forced his mind back in on itself – out of the time-dragging present into the timeless sanctuary of the past. He felt himself relax as his mind bore him away, enveloping him in a soft tranquil warmth. In the gentle kindness of a person he had loved with all his heart.

His mind took him home.

Ali loved her deeply. He held his mother in wondrous adulation, exulting her love at the highest altar of his feelings. His mother had cherished and loved him, the way only a mother can.

His mother loved her family. Alisha was fiercely protective and often acted as a shield for her little ones, safeguarding them from the wrath of their father.

But something had changed. Ali knew not how or why, he only sensed it, coming, in the way he could feel a storm build before the first smudge of cloud ever appeared in the sky. One fateful day, his mother took her shield away and exposed his transgression.

It was two weeks after his birthday when he knew something was wrong. He saw the tears in her eyes, after she reported the rumour to his father, that Ali had been seen stealing bread at the market.

Staring out of his bedroom window, he watched her rush out the farm office in obvious distress, covering her mouth with her hand as his father stalked after her, grim faced. He stopped in the kitchen and bellowed up the stairs, 'Ali, I want you in my office in five minutes time.'

Ali had just returned from the market on his weekly mission to buy their shopping. His mother had grown accustomed to sending him out for all their groceries, when she discovered he was able to get a better, often a surprisingly better price, than she could ever haggle.

Ali had done well at first but the market traders eventually grew tired of his games. At first they indulged him, not because they hadn't seen those tricks before – they had. They simply couldn't believe a boy of his age could pull them off so convincingly, and initially they had smiled knowingly to each other, winking their agreement around the souk at the other traders.

Ali's favourite ploy was to heap praise on the goods he needed, while lamenting the fact that he had little money to afford them. This was the complete opposite of the tactic employed by all the other customers, who preferred to stand around criticising and finding fault with near-perfect produce. His complimentary approach saw the traders respond with enthusiasm, driving down their price to lift a sale off such an innocent victim.

Such a positive advert couldn't be better for business! Especially when Ali would shout through the long skirts of a more discerning female clientele, 'I hope you have enough pitta left for me, after the beautiful lady has bought hers.' This would induce two, sometimes three or four hesitant women to step up to the counter as one. But after a while he ran out of ruses and the prices went back up. Worse, this happened just as his mother began giving him less money for the food.

'Times are extremely hard at the moment, Ali,' she said to him one day, as she handed over a few coins before he set off. 'Half the apricot harvest could fail because we cannot afford the price of water. Whatever money you can save us, we can use to buy more water. We will get it back ten-fold in apricots, come the harvest.'

This produced a dilemma in Ali, which he solved very simply – he stole half the groceries. On a good day, he did even better.

With the sound of his father's bellow ringing into silence, Ali got up from his small pallet bed to trudge gloomily downstairs – knowing the deep wracking sobs coming from his mother's bedroom, didn't bode well. Traipsing slowly out of the house, he took as much time as he dared crossing the yard towards the old farm building which housed his father's office. He rapped on the wooden door hard, but the heavy cedar planks reduced his efforts to a light tapping.

'Come in Ali,' Mohammed called out, and he went in and stood in front of his father's desk, glancing around nervously for clues to his predicament.

The room had a strong masculine feel to it and smelled of aromatic tobacco and gun oil. An old rifle stood against the wall by the window, while a few books and strange engine parts balanced precariously on the rough-sawn wooden shelves. Dark magnificent rugs were spread across the floor, but the years had worn them, removing their sheen and exposing their ribs in the places where the foot traffic was heaviest.

His father's voice rang with controlled anger as he shot out fiercely, 'Look at me, Ali. I want you to think very carefully before you answer. Have you been stealing from the market?'

'Yes Papi,' Ali replied, without hesitating.

Mohammed rocked back on his heels slightly then looked at his son in surprise. 'You do know that stealing is expressly forbidden by our own laws and those of the Prophet? What would the world come to, if everybody stole everything? We would have all our apricots stolen then be forced to beg and steal for ourselves.'

'Yes Papi. I didn't want that to happen to us, so I took some food. I stole as much as I could, then gave the money I saved to Mama,' he said proudly.

Mohammed's expression changed to shock. It wasn't what he was anticipating, he was expecting a lie – he knew that stealing and lying often shared the same dirty bed. 'I see,' he pondered. 'Well, this is still a

very serious matter and the punishment must fit the crime. It is sin in the eyes of God. So for His sake and yours, I'm going to make sure you never do it again. Now lie across this desk!

Mohammed took down an old donkey whip that was hanging from a bent nail in the wall.

Svit ! He cut the whip across Ali's back, repeating in a cold metallic voice, 'You will not steal,' *Ssvit!* The half-inch thick cane sliced into him again. 'It is a sin. *Svvvvvit!*

Pausing to take careful aim with each stroke, Mohammed whipped his son mercilessly, laying each sizzling blow a finger-width apart. He worked his way down methodically, from shoulders to thighs, then stood up to get his breath back.

Ali lay across the desk, gripping the sides with his eyes shut tight; but apart from an initial gasp of pained shock, he hadn't moved nor made a sound.

Mohammed resumed his stance. He began again on the same path, making the crop whistle an octave higher.

Ali lost all self-control and started screaming and kicking against the heart-splitting pain. Pinning his son's writhing body to the desk with his free hand, Mohammed carried on whipping him, rhythmically, impervious to the shrieks of torment. He only stopped when the old whip broke, and throwing it to the floor in contempt, told Ali to go to his room and think over the lesson.

Ali ran out of the study bucking his hips, clutching desperately at his back as if trying to ward off a swarm of attacking hornets. He stumbled into the sanctuary of his room and dived on his bed, squirming and twisting in a futile bid to shake off the molten fire running across his back. Slowly, the flames melted down to a throbbing white heat and as his ragged breathing became more even, he swore that he would never get caught stealing again.

He was so consumed by his agony, that he didn't notice his mother glance into his bedroom before running downstairs and out towards the farm office.

Going swiftly through the open doorway she found Mohammed upright on his knees, tears streaming down his face.

'What else could I do?' he beseeched. 'Let a stranger or enemy teach him the horror of pain? Which as God willed, was my fate?'

Wrapping her arms lovingly around his shoulders, Alisha began to rock him and stroke his hair, until gradually, his sobbing died down.

Choosing her moment with care, she crooned gently to him, 'It was right for someone who loves him to teach him the horror of pain, Mohammed. The world we live in is harsh and there are desperate times ahead. Some day, he will have to deal with much worse, I am certain of it.'

Then ever more softly she murmured to herself, 'I only wish that in his infinite wisdom, Allah had blessed us with a better reason.'

L'APE FEMININA

That Friday marked the successful conclusion of Victor's new series of lectures he had entitled 'We the People' – a term he lifted from the opening lines of the American Constitution. Many of his students were not surprised, they knew Victor considered the document to be one of the clearest statements of human freedom ever penned.

The lectures created a storm of interest across a wide spectrum of the students and several of the Dons, who had their curiosity piqued by a carefully crafted rumour, which had Leah slipped into the gossip-

sphere, that the talks were seditious and it was likely Victor would be suspended for speaking out, as they constituted a direct attack on British governance. To ensure the Hall was packed to the rafters, she told three carefully selected friends that she had edited the Professor's lecture notes, and they must keep the subject matter secret. This worked so effectively, that on the second day the fire warden had ordered Victor to re-locate to the 1500-seat theatre, but still had problems closing the doors on the clamouring throng trying to force its way inside.

To celebrate his success, they decided on a private supper between themselves. Victor opened a bottle of champagne and Leah proposed the toast: 'To a Brave New World,' both downing their first glass in a single gulp.

Victor refilled them from the bottle in his hand. 'I understand how the second lecture drew such a crowd, but not why the first one did,' he said, cracking a crystalline blue eye at Leah.

'Then you have much in common with George Orwell's Winston Smith. You understand the "how", not the "why".'

'I see. Now I know the "who", the "why" becomes clear. But the "how" still eludes.'

'Well Victor, I can't be certain, but there was a vicious rumour circulating that the lectures would propose a better system of government; constituting a direct attack on the present set up. A lot of people were saying you would get defrocked.'

Convulsing into peals of laughter, he started shaking so uncontrollably that he spilt his champagne on the table. After several moments he calmed down saying, 'Machiavelli would have envied you, Leah,' then his expression became more thoughtful and he looked at her squarely. 'I hope you don't mind, but I have a favour to ask – a boon to beg of thee.'

'Ask away Victor. I never tire of watching a grown man beg,' Leah replied, the Pol Roger '62 emboldening her risqué.

He smiled quickly as he replenished his glass. 'Most of my relatives died some time ago. My son and I fell out, and anyway, he's richer than Croesus so it won't be of interest to him. Anyhow, what it all boils down to is this: I'm not without some money and property, and wondered if you would consider being an executor of my estate?'

'I would be delighted. Though you're not going to put me to work in the near future?' she asked with a flare of concern.

'At some point. Of that, you can be certain.'

'I can't imagine a world without you. Who are the other executors?'

'There are three of you in total. I doubt you'll have heard of the other two, but at one time or other they were both students of mine here at Oxford. I know that it's a lot of extra work; that nobody wants to do any real graft these days, so I have offered them each 50,000 pounds for their time and effort. I am prepared to make the same offer to you. In case you are wondering about any Catch 22s, I ought to mention that if you do not administer my estate in accordance with the exact instructions in my Will, you only get 10,000. I have also arranged for the tax on these amounts to be paid. So you will receive 50,000 pounds free and clear.'

'That's an incredibly generous offer but I would do it anyway. 50,000 pounds? Are these instructions illegal, or perverse in some way?'

'Ha! Sorry to disappoint, but no. The only one you may have a little difficulty with, is I want all my notes and books destroyed. All of them – every one. If you have any other concerns, why not read the Will then give me your answer? Let me fetch it from the shelf on which it resides, so you can go through it.'

'You want me to burn your library?'

'I do.'

'Why on earth...?'

'Because contained therein, is the knowledge of how to control Mankind. And I don't wish Mankind controlled, I prefer anarchy to tyranny as I'm sure any reasonable person does. Before you say anything more, let me add that the other two have already agreed to my wish.'

'I see. Well, I would be delighted.'

'Delighted with the money, rather than the chance to burn my books,' he chuckled, climbing down the library ladder with a wad of papers. After blowing the dust off, he passed them across to her.

'Here, have a read while I prepare our supper.'

Leah carried the papers over to his writing desk as Victor disappeared into the small kitchen in the back. 'How are you cooking the scallops?' she asked.

'Coquilles Mornay à la Victor.'

An hour later he called out in French, 'How are you getting on?'

'J'ai finis,' she replied, walking over to the dining table.

'Good good. Then allow me to serve you the finest scallops you will ever eat north of Normandy – served Chez Victor,' he shamelessly plagiarised the famous London eatery in Soho as he placed a large blue and gold Coalport plate in front of her.

Four white scallop shells, with a crisp brown bread crumb top, sizzled and hissed through mini volcanoes of erupting cheese sauce; scenting the room in the voluptuous aromas of white wine, nutmeg and garlic, with the lemon tang of the sea wafting succulently in the background.

'Victor, that smells divine.'

'Perhaps we should give them a moment to cool,' he suggested, knowing the anticipation was part of the pleasure for them both.

He sipped tentatively at his Pouilly Fuissé, then asked her in faultless Parisian French, 'So, what is your answer?'

'I am honoured by your offer, and will honour all of your wishes. Also, let me add my sincere gratitude for the money. Thank you, you are a very generous man.' She leaned across the table to kiss him on the cheek.

'Thank you, my dear, thank you. I can't tell you how delighted I am that you've accepted. Now, as I always turn the other cheek, let me seal our bargain with this.'

He took a velvet jewellery box out of his pocket, holding it up with a flourish, before placing it gently on the table next to her.

It was Prussian blue and worn with age. A gold motif on top of the box outlined a pair of balancing scales with a lion-headed horse in one tray and a globe of the world in the other. It was exquisitely crafted. The lion-horse was flowing with motion, while the globe appeared to turn, whenever she looked away from it slightly. Overall the quality of workmanship imbued it with a classical, yet ancient mystique.

With her expectation mounting into heady delight, Leah reached out to pick up the box but as she did, suddenly felt the wheels of her life tip, then change direction.

Inside the box was a magnificent ring, sandwiched between soft satin folds that had yellowed with age. It was formed from intricately woven gold, from which exquisitely crafted hands gripped a large white diamond in the centre that was surrounded by semi-circles of rubies and sapphires set in interlocking half-moon shapes.

Lured by its hypnotic beauty, she took it out then turned it in the buttery rays of the setting sun to see an inscription carved into the solid gold beneath the stones; which looked a little like Egyptian hieroglyphs, but her closer examination revealed they were not quite the same. Unable to translate them, she looked at him expectantly.

'It's Ancient Assyrian, so the writing is Cuneiform,' he volunteered. 'They were the oldest civilisation that could write. So it wouldn't be foolish to assume that the ring is much older than the box.'

'How old is it?'

'The inscription dates from around 1500BC, but no one will tell me its exact age. They just say it's extremely old.'

'It has a timeless beauty,' she smiled, slipping it onto the middle finger of her right hand. It fit her perfectly and she gazed into the depth of the stones. The late evening sunlight seemed to pass between each semi-circle, changing colour slightly before prising into the next; so she was surprised to see only a single dot of white light reflecting on the bookcase in front of her. It had a fierce bright white centre, circled by the translucent colours of a rainbow.

Leah felt her appreciation for its beauty expanding into wonderment. 'It's the most stunning present Victor. Thank you. I shall wear it always; every time I see it I will be reminded of this moment. I would love to know what the inscription means. Any idea?'

'It's hard to be certain because the Sumerians used the same icons for several different things. In my view, it's the combination of those two icons which date it. Either that or they were carved on later. Which is unlikely, as we've only been able to translate that particular cuneiform for the last hundred

years, while the wear on the inscription is obviously older. A forger could have gone to a great deal of trouble, only to have inscribed "I drink camel urine" on it, for all he was aware.

'What I mean to say is this,' he went on as Leah rolled her eyes at him playfully, 'Only a person who knew what the inscription meant would bother to engrave those icons. It's their translation which leads me to think that the ring must date from a time when that writing could be understood, and that combination of icons was used prolifically around 1500 BC. It's an excellent example of how an understanding of human nature, can be used to ascertain the most likely set of events, when there is a dearth of scientific fact.'

Leah knew he was deliberately lengthening the process in order to heighten the moment, so ruefully, she locked eyes on him. 'Perhaps learning ancient Sumerian, would save me a lot of time getting them translated.'

'That's what I felt too,' he smiled back.

'In that case, I'll probably find some excellent reference material in those books behind you – if I dig deep enough and long enough.'

'Anything but that, I implore you. Allow me to remove the vandal of your curiosity by telling you plainly and simply. It means "One of the Chosen Few". '

Then he smiled broadly at the frozen look on her face, as he picked up his knife and fork.

THE DESCENDANTS OF THE KILLER APE

The sounds of bustling excitement bubbled up to Ali from the steps of Sacramento City Hall, breaking his reverie.

He peered down cautiously to see the waiting press corps reacting to the movement of a uniformed security guard swinging open one of the large glass doors of the entrance.

A group of men and women threaded their way out in a line, dressed in smart and for California, rather conservative suits. They filed down the steps robotically then formed into three orderly rows at the side of the podium, fifty feet away from it.

They were under strict instruction to do so – the newly elected Governor enjoyed having the limelight focused on him. On his first day in Office he had issued a memo forbidding all staff to stand anywhere near him, or wherever the cameras might pick them up, as he was photographed going about his stately duties.

One of the staff loyal to the previous governor, had forwarded the memo to The San Francisco Times, which had gleefully splashed the edict right across the centre of the front page. The accompanying editorial went on to describe the arrogance of the new People's Favourite; asking whether Californians were about to be ruled by spin, not substance.

When the Governor finished reading the article, he flew into a rage: instigating the first of his many witch hunts and firing five people on the spot. None of whom happened to be guilty of the act.

When Ali finished reading the article, he saw how perfect the man was: as a target. Not only was the Governor a bastion of American culture, a hero of war movies and a staunch Republican, but by standing on his own he could be shot without anyone getting in the way of the bullet. This had prompted Ali's closer scrutiny of the Governor's habits to unearth his weaknesses, and it didn't take him long to uncover

the man's vulnerable side. The Governor of California had an unselfish streak – he liked to share his pearls of wisdom in public, and often.

'In the Muslim and Christian faiths, vanity is a deadly sin,' Ali smiled to himself. 14:56. 'Only four minutes to go. It's not too late to pull out. I could simply pack up and walk; no one the wiser.'

But he knew there were too many people relying on him now, to deliver. He was only a small, albeit crucial piece of the terrifying jigsaw about to be clicked into place, and with a twinge of regret Ali dismissed the notion. His mission to assassinate the Governor was only the beginning, the real glory would come at the end, when he orchestrated the fear and chaos that would bring the United States crashing to its knees in a few short months.

To occupy himself for the few tense minutes before taking the shot, he allowed his mind to flicker back to when this had all started. To a terrible night so long ago, which haunted him as though it had happened yesterday.

He was sleeping peacefully in his bed on that warm September evening, when he was vibrated awake by a strange noise coming from the mud-packed road which dead-ended on their home. Staring out of his small bedroom window, he watched it coming: clouds of dust and blue smoke billowing in its wake; the roar of the diesel engine growing louder as it accelerated along the final 100 yards.

It appeared to his thirteen-year-old mind like a ravening monster, seething with malice as it raged through the night. Ali could feel a choking fear crush his throat dry as it screeched to a halt twenty yards from their house. Lights erupted from all over it, illuminating the house in a sterile whitewash, as the long barrel whirled down to level with the front door.

The commander stood up in the turret, waving at the soldiers clinging to the sides of the tank to disperse. They jumped off quickly to fan out around the house.

The second his men were all in position, the commander lifted a megaphone to his lips, and a surprisingly young voice rang out so sharply, Ali could hear the strings of his mother's lute humming in distress.

'This is the Heavy Armour Division. You are completely surrounded and an incendiary shell is zeroed on your house. Come out with your hands up – naked. You have one minute to comply before we fire. I repeat: you have one minute to disrobe and walk out with your hands up. And that minute starts now.'

The officer lifted his arm theatrically and looked down at his watch. Though young, he was nobody's fool. He had seen more than his fair share of this hard and bitter conflict and it had made him exceedingly cautious. He knew the tactics of the rebels included the hiding explosives and grenades in their clothing, which they would detonate in a final act of defiance. The best way, was to arrest all suspects with their clothes off. It not only made the arrests safer, it also took all the fight out of their civilian enemy – humbling and humiliating the men, while some of the more devout women were often shamed into suicide afterwards.

Just at that moment Mohammed rushed into Ali's bedroom, tears were welling in his eyes as he spoke. 'If anything happens to me, Ali, you must take my place as the head of the family. Remember the Five Pillars of Islam? There is a little money buried under the fifth apricot tree, five rows up and five across from the ditch. Whatever happens tonight, you must first take care of our family. Do whatever these people say, and above all, do not attempt anything heroic. Do this for me and if the worst happens, I will be waiting to greet you in Paradise. Remember, you must do exactly as they say. I will go first and give myself up. You must follow with your mother, brother and sister.'

In the room next door Ali could hear his little brother start to cry, then his mother telling him to hush and be brave before asking Kamsen, his twelve-year-old sister, to help calm him. 'We must be brave my little brother,' Kamsen whispered. 'If you are not quiet, something terrible will happen,' and remarkably, Hassan's crying softened into low sobs.

Anxious and frightened, the family gathered in the narrow corridor before filing downstairs to re-assemble in the kitchen. Ali watched his mother wipe away a silent tear that was jewelling her eyes, as his father took her in his arms and kissed her saying, 'Shhh, Shhh my beloved. We must be strong now. As long as we do nothing to anger or provoke them, everything will be alright. We must give ourselves up. I will go first, then Ali. You and the children must follow.'

The tank commander's voice boomed out: 'Twenty-five, twenty-four, twenty-three.'

Mohammed half-turned to glance nervously at the three alabaster windows which were radiating a shadowless glare through the kitchen.

At "twenty" the soldiers joined in with the chant – some were slightly out of tempo with the main group, sounding almost weary.

Pulling off his nightshirt, Mohammed walked swiftly to the front door, squared his shoulders, then drew himself up to his full height as his hand fell on the latch. Naked but proud, he looked back at his huddled family with an expression of deep sadness and mouthed, 'I love you all,' before pushing open the door to stride out into the floodlights.

'Good,' came the metallic voice. 'Now walk towards the light...Stop. Lie on the ground face down. Spread your arms and legs – wider.'

Ali watched his father obey, thinking this wouldn't be as hard as stealing from the market. He began to undress, motioning at the others to do the same.

'I will go first,' Ali copied his father's lead. 'Then you Mama, then Hassan, and then you Kamsen. Remember what Papi said. Are you ready?'

His mother and sister were holding an arm across their breasts and a hand in front of their groin in a feeble attempt to hide their nudity. Kamsen was trembling uncontrollably in the warm night air.

The voice from the loudhailer echoed out again, 'We know there are more of you in there. Come out now, or we will fire.'

'We must go,' Ali urged, trying to make his voice sound as steady as his father's. 'If we obey them, we have nothing to fear. You must be brave and not cry, Hassan,' he added, adopting the same technique Kamsen had used to soothe his younger brother. 'Are you ready? Now follow me and nothing bad will happen.' Ali thrust out his chin and walked into the white sheet of the halogens, casting backward glances over his shoulder at the rest of his family.

'Good,' the voice barked. 'All of you put your hands up and walk towards the light... Stop. You at the front, walk to your left. The rest stay where you are...Stop. Lie face down. Now spread your arms and legs.' Ali dropped to his knees then flopped forward, doing exactly as instructed.

'Now you – the woman. Move to your right...Stop. Lie face down.' Ali's mother closed her eyes then sank to the ground in the crucifix position. 'Now spread your legs...Wider,' and the soldiers let out a raucous jeer. Some giggled nervously and pointed, while a few made ribald comments.

'Now you two – move apart,' and Hassan and Kamsen obeyed.

For the first time the soldiers could see Kamsen clearly and switched their attention to her. One, with a swagger of authority, walked towards her cat-calling which set off the rest of the pack who started competing with each other to come up with the lewdest comment. They laughed and cackled like hyenas, baring their teeth in wide wolfish grins of relief, while feasting their eyes lustfully on the twelve-year-old girl.

Kamsen dropped straight to the sanctuary of the soil at her feet, then began wriggling and squirming in the dust in a desperate attempt to cover herself.

The man strolling towards her was a Sergeant. He took his time getting to where Kamsen lay. Stamping his feet down on either side of her, he stood for a moment, drinking in her nudity before placing the tip of his rifle between her legs.

'I hope you've got something explosive in there,' he called out to hoots and shrieks of laughter from the pack. 'I'd better make certain, even though I've forgotten my rubber gloves today,' he said, pulling out a thin blue pair to drop them straight in front of the girl's terrified face.

Slinging the rifle over his back, the Sergeant leaned across her quaking form, took a firm grip on each of her bare buttocks then wrenched them apart to inspect his prize, hard-eyed.

A soundless flicker of movement caught Ali's attention and he moved his head a fraction, in time to see his father roll onto his back and kick the guard standing over him in the groin. The soldier was so engrossed in the show Kamsen was unwillingly starring in, that he didn't feel it coming until Mohammed's speeding foot was starting to lift his testicles. There was a crunch, and he bent over double, dropping his rifle straight into the waiting hands of Mohammed.

Cradling the gun like a newborn infant Mohammed rolled over once, then came up elbow-on-knee in the classic position of a marksman.

Aiming as low as he dared at the Sergeant, he gently squeezed the trigger, allowing the natural tendency of the semi-automatic to ride up through the man's body. The first bullet slammed into the Sergeant's thigh; the second shattered his hip; the next three slapped into his torso to the sound of an axe chopping wood. The last bullet found the gap in the Sergeant's Kevlar jacket, just below his armpit; it ricocheted off

the inside of his shoulder joint then took the path of least resistance: ripping through his chest cavity; tumbling through his intestines; exiting from his groin. He fell across Kamsen, convulsing and jerking his life away in a macabre parody of the act of love.

Until Mohammed fired the other soldiers were too absorbed to notice him, and it took them two full seconds to react. Mohammed threw himself sideways, towards the tank, then scooted underneath it. He was now behind the lights and invisible to the soldiers, some of whom fired anyway, hitting the tank and the man standing next to it.

'Turn on the rear lights,' screamed the now frantic voice from the loudhailer. There was a 'Click' and Mohammed was illuminated in the open – sprinting for the safety of his orchard.

He was ten yards short when fourteen soldiers fired as one. Mohammed jerked spasmodically then collapsed to the ground like a ragdoll, dead before his knee hit the ground.

In desperation Ali glanced around but could see no one looking in his direction. Terrified he would be next, he decided to follow his father's example rather than heed his advice.

He jumped up swiftly then bolted for the pitch black shadow at the side of the house. But as he approached the edge of the light, there was a shout from behind him and his foot tripped on a stone. He went down hard as bullets snapped and cracked over him.

'No one move or you will all be shot. I repeat: do not move,' shouted the commander.

Ali complied willingly. He froze.

Peering through half-closed eyelids, he could see most of the soldiers aiming at his mother, brother and sister; two were still aiming at his dead father but only one was pointing a rifle at him. 'They think I'm dead,' he realised, as he watched the man nearest him drop his gun barrel six inches then call out to the others, 'Reloading.'

As the soldier unclipped the magazine from his rifle, Ali leapt up and streaked for the sanctuary of the dark, ten feet away. Shots splattered the ground around him in a deadly leaden hail, but he jinked and swerved into the dark, his hands clawing desperately at the air to pull himself forward.

His fear gifted him speed – he didn't stop running until he reached the top of the hill, where a thick bamboo hedge met the deep ditch that drained the orchard in winter.

Crouching behind a tree trunk, he looked back anxiously to see if any of the soldiers had followed. His relief on seeing no one was quickly replaced by a feeling of utter helplessness. What could he do against so many men? There was only one thing that could re-balance these odds – a gun. But all the guns were kept locked in the kitchen, in full view of the tank. Then a distant bark from the neighbouring farm, reminded him of the old Martini action .270 in his father's study. Mohammed kept it there for shooting the wild, rabid dogs that scavenged the orchard in the late summer months.

Stealing quietly along the old boundary path that skirted the orchard before bending around the back of the farm buildings, Ali crept silently up to the back wall of his father's office; giving thanks to Allah when he saw the window was open.

Peeking cautiously inside to make sure the coast was clear, he felt under the window-frame for the cold comfort of the rifle barrel. It was exactly where he remembered it and, getting hold of the end, he levered it out of the window.

Ducking into the deep shadow of the wall, he pulled down the under lever which opened the breech and to his relief, saw the gleam of a bullet lying in the chamber.

Though accurate, the rifle was single shot – it had to be reloaded each time it was fired. 'I need more bullets,' he thought, but as he prepared to climb in and get them from the drawer in his father's desk, he heard the unmistakable squeak of a rubber boot on the stone floor outside the study.

He jumped away from the window as the door burst open and three soldiers ran into the room – guns in their shoulders, eyes on their sights.

Ali grabbed the rifle and ran stealthily into the orchard, listening acutely for any sign they had seen him. But hearing only the muffled crash of breaking furniture drifting up from his father's office, he headed back up the hill, feeling suddenly sad and very alone.

In his plight, he ran straight over the edge of the ditch, tumbling down the steep bank to end with a splash in the pool of muddy water at the bottom.

It hurt, but he hadn't let go of the gun.

Terrified the noise might have alerted the soldiers, he struggled his way out and clambered down the old stream's course, heading to where a large olive tree grew. 'I'll have a clear view of the house from there,' he thought, as he broke into a trot.

Half-way there a shot rang out, then the desperate shrieks of Hassan came ringing up to him.

They ceased abruptly, cut-off in mid-scream.

Hot tears sprang into his eyes, blinding him, making him stumble over the smooth river stones as he negotiated his way towards the tree. When he finally arrived at the base of the gnarled trunk he threw his arms around it – embracing it like a long lost friend before breaking into anguished sobbing.

The old olive tree had stood there for six generations of his family and had been struck by lightning when half-grown. The bolt had killed a section of the tree near the top, and the seasonal rains had rotted out a hollow, in which Ali and Kamsen often hid from Hassan in happier days of hide-and-seek.

He gazed up at the familiar tree, silhouetted against the horns of the crescent moon, shook himself to will away his tears, then slung the rifle over his back and started to climb. The familiar hand-holds came straight to him as he pulled himself into their old hiding place, and only when sure he was completely hidden, did he dare to look through a small gap in the branches – towards the farm buildings seventy yards away.

The scene confronting him exceeded his worst fears – so terrible that for several moments he could not believe it was real. The latticework of twigs and leaves were framing a picture postcard that had come straight from the pits of hell, sent signed and stamped, by the Devil himself.

The house was ablaze. Tall red-yellow flames were crackling evilly as they snaked up into the night sky, to leave the farm bathed in an orangey glow.

Ali weaved his head around, searching frantically for his mother; to find her lying in a pool of blood, leaking from a cavity which had once been her tender, loving face. He choked on the horror, then pulled the rifle off his back to look through the scope.

It placed him ten yards away.

Hassan was nowhere to be seen and a line of men was standing in front of the white picket fence that ran around his mother's vegetable garden.

Here the queue ended, and Ali's life-long nightmare began. Bent over the fence, tied at wrist and ankle to the bottom rail, was his little sister Kamsen.

The man behind her had his fatigues around his ankles and was rutting into her ferociously, while the waiting soldiers passed a bottle and told him to hurry up.

Grunting himself to a finish, the soldier was instantly pulled out of the way by the next one in line. Ali focused on the crosshairs, aiming at him; but as he did he noticed his sister's face in the bottom of the lens. She was looking straight at him. Straight at their old hiding place and she was crying.

No, she wasn't crying. She was repeating something. The same thing over and over. As he read her silent lips, a violent shudder ran through him.

'Kill me Ali. Kill me.'

Taking slow breaths to steady his panic, he looked through the scope again.

There was no mistaking it. Kamsen was definitely looking at their old hiding place, and those were the words.

He looked down for a moment, thought about it, then decided he couldn't do it.

Instead, he chose to shoot the soldier walking towards her and wriggled himself into a shooting position. Resting the barrel on a solid limb of the tree, he tweaked the crosshairs onto the soldier's chest.

This man had been born luckier than most. Taking out his engorged penis, he swivelled around on his heels to show it off to the others. It was monstrous, nearly a foot long with an angry red head as bulbous as Kamsen's ankle. Large enough Ali thought, to present him with a fairly decent target.

Linking his hands high over his head, the soldier began thrusting and rotating his hips, making the monster dance as he gyrated his way around the back of the terrified girl.

When he eventually stopped behind her, he slapped it on to his palm as if to weigh it, then squeezed a hand around the base of its massive girth, causing the head to inflate to an impossible size.

Some of the men burst out laughing, while the others stood rooted to the spot, round-eyed in their disbelief. The soldier grinned at them knowingly and satisfied he had the full attention of his comrades he positioned himself carefully bent his knees, then with a shout of triumph he lunged forward – pile-driving the monster deep into her anus.

Kamsen let out a bloodcurdling scream as it tore into her – her single hair-raising cry bouncing off the hillside to echo down the valley in a series of diminishing shrieks. The sound of her torture ripped through Ali – each repeated shriek a white hot poker thrust into his chest: searing his heart; vaporising his soul; making him whimper out loud in acute physical agony. Her magnificent chocolate brown eyes, were pleading with his own, when the recoil hit him.



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"If we compare the faults of people with those of princes, as well as their respective good qualities, we shall find the people vastly superior in all that is good and glorious".

- MACHIAVELLI –

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